

Columnists

Originally published September 23, 2011 at 9:01 PM | Page modified September 23, 2011 at 10:46 PM

EcoConsumer

The right space heater can tame energy bills

Trying to outsmart our home heating bills is an annual fall pastime. Today we'll focus on a specific product, the space heater, and explore its practical potential to tame energy bills.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Trying to outsmart our home heating bills is an annual fall pastime. But as we strive to conserve energy and save money, we need to be careful not to outsmart ourselves.

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Although we now have a multitude of green strategies and tools to choose from, our success depends on how we use them. Today we'll focus on a specific product, the space heater, and explore its practical potential to tame energy bills.

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Q: Will a space heater really reduce energy use on its own?

A: No. The only way a space heater can cut overall heating costs is if its use in one room allows you to turn down the main heating source in your home. If you are willing to keep the rest of your house colder at times, you could lower your energy costs, according to Seattle City Light.

Q: What type of space heater should I use?

A: For a house or apartment, an electric space heater is the way to go. Combustion space heaters that use fuels such as kerosene and propane are not recommended for general household use because of safety concerns.

The two main types of electric space heaters are convection and radiant. Also known as quartz heaters, radiant units usually cost less than other electric space heaters, typically under \$50. But radiant heaters don't warm up a whole room very well, only heating what's directly in front of them.

Choose from a variety of convection heaters, including models with ceramic heating elements and the "electric oil" type, which heats oil circulating inside the heater. "Natural convection" heaters, which don't have fans, may take a while to heat a room. Most cost \$30 to \$80. Convection heaters with fans heat a room much faster but make more noise, and these often run from \$40 to \$200.

Q: Will I burn my house down with a space heater?

A: Many manufacturers have introduced safety features on space heaters in recent years, but

safety remains a prime concern. More than 6,000 home fires involving space heaters occur in the U.S. annually, resulting in 250 deaths. Electric space heaters cause nearly half of those fires.

Select a model that automatically shuts off if it overheats or tips over, and make sure the heater does not overload your home's electrical system. Keep children, pets and combustible materials at least 3 feet away. Most manufacturers advise against using extension cords with space heaters. Underwriters Laboratories has more space-heater safety tips at seati.ms/oJudu6.

Q: At my job I'm freezing from October until June. What about having a space heater at work?

A: You need to be warm at work, but don't use a space heater unless the safety coordinator for your workplace has approved the heater and your cord arrangement. Space heaters are banned in some buildings due to fire and injury hazards.

Q: Are space heaters really a sensible green choice for my house or apartment?

A: From an environmental standpoint, space heaters don't usually provide the best permanent heating solution. For a long-term fix, undertake whole-house conservation measures such as insulating and weatherstripping to make your home more comfortable and energy efficient. But if you live in an apartment or can't easily improve your home's energy efficiency, a space heater may offer a relatively green way to make your home cozier.

When shopping for a convection heater, first estimate the square footage of your room, and then research heaters online, checking specifications and reviews. Most 1,500-watt space heaters should adequately heat a 200-square-foot room. Choose a model with two or three heat settings, which make it easier to save energy or use the heater in different rooms.

A carefully chosen space heater might help in certain situations, but making systematic conservation and performance improvements in your home heating system is still the best way to be as snug as a green bug in a rug during the long Northwest winter.

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