

Money Matters

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Thermostats have power to save on heating bills

A basic programmable thermostat or even a manually operated unit could meet your needs.



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Ecoconsumer

You don't need a thermostat to know what's hot.

Even if you have only a passing interest in home energy conservation, you know thermostats are no longer the utilitarian, mundane devices they once were. Thermostats have gotten downright trendy.

Now you can elaborately program your thermostat, or monitor it with your smartphone. One popular model, the Nest, keeps track of your habits and encourages you to reduce energy use.

The newfangled thermostats have a lot to offer, but a basic programmable thermostat or even a manually operated unit could also meet your needs. When it comes to saving energy, you have the power.

Dial for dollars

Whether you operate it with a dial, push-buttons or remotely, a thermostat simply regulates the temperature of your home. You will save money, conserve energy and help reduce global warming by using less fuel for personal heating and cooling. A thermostat can conceivably make that easier.

First, let's dispense with the myth that turning the heat down when you leave or go to sleep doesn't save energy, since the furnace supposedly has to work harder later to warm the house again. The Department of Energy says lowering the temperature of your home always conserves energy.

The main energy-savings-related advantage of a programmable thermostat is that you don't need to remember to turn the thermostat down when you leave or go to bed. But if household members are typically diligent about that, a programmable thermostat won't increase your energy savings much.

Benefits of a programmable thermostat may also be minimal when occupants of a home have varying schedules.

Not all programmable thermostats and heating systems play well together. One Seattle resident purchased a Nest thermostat but was told by installers that it would not communicate properly with her ductless heat pump, so she couldn't use it. If you have a heat pump, baseboard heating system or radiant heat, you may need a special type of programmable thermostat designed for

that system.

Get smart

Most people who have programmable thermostats don't actually program them, using the manual settings instead, according to a 2010 study by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

The federal Energy Star program, which certifies various products for energy efficiency, stopped certifying programmable thermostats in 2009. Program officials made this decision because many programmable thermostats are confusing to operate and depend solely on the user to save energy. Energy Star is currently developing new standards for climate control devices, including thermostats.

Before you buy a programmable thermostat, try it out at a friend's house or examine it closely in the store to make sure you feel comfortable programming it.

Also consider choosing a model with scheduling flexibility. For instance, "5-1-1" thermostats let you program one schedule for Monday through Friday and different schedules for Saturday and Sunday.

Dial in to the future

As an antidote to hard-to-use programmable thermostats, the latest models emphasize simplicity. The most high-profile of these is the Nest, a sleek, round, self-proclaimed "learning thermostat."

When you first install the Nest, you adjust it manually, but it quickly learns from those settings and then begins programming itself. The Nest also displays a little green leaf logo when you use a more efficient setting than normal, as a motivational tool.

The Nest and several of its competitors have Wi-Fi, and you can program and monitor them with a smartphone or computer. This remote operation hasn't always worked perfectly, but many users love it. Nest and other companies continue to make software improvements.

High-tech models such as the Nest usually cost \$250-300, compared with \$25-100 for most other programmable thermostats and \$15-40 for manual units.

When replacing your thermostat, remember that many older thermostats contain mercury and must not be put in the garbage. Most Puget Sound-area household [hazardous waste collection centers](#) accept mercury thermostats for recycling.

If a new thermostat helps you conserve energy or makes your life easier, go for it. But also consider a more pragmatic energy-saving tool: A sweater.

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