

Homes & Real Estate

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Answers shed light on common bulb questions

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

It’s tempting to think that pithy old saying should apply to light bulbs. Back in 2007, however, Congress agreed with environmental advocates that standard incandescent light bulbs were indeed broken from an energy-efficiency standpoint.

Legislation signed by then-President George W. Bush phased out the sale of the most inefficient light bulbs, including many incandescents.

The phaseout, now nearly complete, has encountered strong resistance from some quarters. But we need to accept that those old-school, energy-wasting light bulbs are going away for good.

To shed light on the confusing transition, let’s address a few common consumer questions about light bulbs.

Q: If I want to hoard incandescent bulbs, can I still buy them?

A: You can probably find the old standard 40- and 60-watt incandescent bulbs at many retailers for a few more months. Note that the new energy-efficiency standards do not apply to several types of specialty bulbs, including three-way bulbs, appliance bulbs, colored lights and plant lights.

Q: Is it illegal to hoard bulbs or use inefficient light bulbs in my home?

A: No. But buying more of them doesn’t make sense financially. The two best alternatives — LEDs (light-emitting diode bulbs) and CFLs (compact fluorescent lights) — will save you money over time because they last so much longer and reduce your energy bill.

Environmentally, buying incandescents is certainly the wrong move. Saving energy is one of the easiest and most effective ways to fight climate change and conserve resources.

Q: Don’t the most energy-efficient light bulbs cost a lot more up front?

A: Yes, but prices have dropped significantly recently. In western Washington, look for LEDs and CFLs with in-store discounts funded by local utilities.

For example, Seattle City Light (seattle.gov/twistandsave, 206-684-3800) provides discounts of up to \$10 on LED bulbs and fixtures. Puget Sound Energy (pse.com/savingsandenergycenter, 800-562-1482) gives discounts of up to \$8 on LED bulbs and \$15 on LED fixtures.

Contact those electric utilities or check their websites to find participating retailers, including major chains and hundreds of area stores.

Q: How do I make sure I get a high-quality LED or CFL bulb that meets my needs?

A: This has been a problem, especially for CFLs. Until recently, it might have taken several hours of researching CFLs to make sure that you didn't buy a dud. That's a hidden cost, since "time is money" for most of us.

LEDs are relatively new, but so far it seems much easier to find reliable ones, particularly for specific situations. Most LEDs are dimmable, for example. You might still need to do a little research, and you can also rely on friends and knowledgeable retail staff for recommendations. Many utility websites provide detailed information about energy-efficient bulbs.

Q: Why would I choose more-expensive LEDs instead of CFLs?

A: In tests, LEDs have been shown to last much longer than CFLs, and they use less energy. It also may be easier with LEDs to find specific bulbs that provide the kind of light you like.

Q: Is recycling required for LED bulbs?

A: No. Because CFLs contain tiny amounts of mercury, however, they must be recycled. Find western Washington recycling locations for CFLs and other fluorescent lighting at TakeItBackNetwork.org and on the Puget Sound Energy website. Never put CFLs in your home-recycling cart or in the garbage.

Q: What about halogens as a lower-cost bulb choice?

A: Many halogens and the new "halogen incandescent" bulbs meet the new energy-efficiency standards, but usually just barely. You'll be better off in the long run, both financially and environmentally, sticking to LEDs and CFLs. Unlike energy-efficient bulbs, halogens can get very hot and some burn out quickly.

Q: To wrap this up, how about sharing a new trend in "green" home lighting?

A: Self-contained cordless LED lighting units have become popular. Some stick right on the wall, or have motion detectors. These small, inexpensive lights shine brightly and often work well. But because they are usually powered by disposable alkaline batteries, they aren't necessarily resource-efficient, so consider using rechargeable batteries in these lights.

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