

# Mailbag: selecting a water heater, and other green concerns

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

From water heaters to water bottles, readers have plenty of green questions, and we've got answers.

**Q:** *I need a new water heater soon — what do I need to know about new energy-efficiency regulations?*

**A:** Water heaters manufactured after April 15, 2015, must meet new federal energy-efficiency standards. After that date, water heaters not meeting the new standards can still be purchased and installed, but eventually installers' inventories will run out.

For a water-heater installation in the next few months, you can:

- Choose a new, energy-efficient tank water heater, which may cost at least several hundred dollars more;
- Go with an existing-type

tank water heater, while they're still available;

- Choose a tankless water heater. They typically already meet the new standards.

Most of the new tank water heaters will be taller and wider by at least three inches. If your current water heater is in a tight space such as a closet, reconstruction may be required for installation of your next unit.

Don't be pressured by water-heater installers into making a quick decision because of the new regulations. Get several estimates for any work.

Keep in mind that your long-term savings and the benefits to the environment from the new units can be significant. The U.S. Department of Energy estimates the new water-heater standards will avoid carbon dioxide emissions over 30 years equivalent to annual

emissions of 34 million cars, resulting in \$63 billion in energy-bill savings.

**Q:** *Bag recycling confuses me. When recycling plastic and paper bags, if the handle is a different material than the rest of the bag, must I remove it before recycling? And can reusable tote bags be recycled when they get worn out?*

**A:** If a paper grocery bag has standard twisted-paper handles, you can recycle the whole bag, handles and all. If it has string or plastic handles, remove them before recycling.

For plastic bags, also remove the handle if it's a harder plastic or different material. Plastic bags can be recycled at many grocery stores and other retailers and in some residential recycling programs (make a "bag of bags"). Try to reuse all paper and plastic bags. Farmers

markets and thrift stores often want them if you have extras.

Reusable tote bags sold at many stores are usually made of plastic (polypropylene), canvas or cotton. Polypropylene (#5) bags are technically recyclable, but most recycling programs don't accept them, so put ripped or beat-up ones in the garbage. Worn-out cotton or canvas tote bags are accepted by many textile-collection programs; see [kingcounty.gov/threadcycle](http://kingcounty.gov/threadcycle) for listings.

**Q:** *I want to hire someone to clean the moss off my roof, but in an environmentally friendly way. Any tips?*

**A:** Hiring a professional for this job is a great idea. Doing it yourself gets risky, especially on a steeply pitched roof.

Research roof cleaners online, ask friends for

recommendations and check references. Try to find a roof cleaner who can do the job without toxic chemicals (with careful pressure-washing, for example).

Moss usually comes back after roof cleaning if conditions remain unchanged. Consider hiring a contractor to prune trees to reduce shade on the roof. Some of us even learn to live with a little roof moss, although moss can eventually damage your roof.

**Q:** *I often bike and walk on the Eastside and see lots of litter, including many discarded plastic water bottles. They seem very damaging to the environment. Can anything be done about them?*

**A:** Throwaway water bottles waste plenty of resources (especially in production), even when they get recycled. And the problem is getting

worse, with U.S. sales of non-sparkling bottled water in supermarkets growing 11 percent in 2014.

Instead of buying water in single-use bottles by the case, invest in several reusable water bottles for your household. You'll find a variety of styles at local stores and online.

Fight all types of litter by taking direct action. A grassroots-based organization in Australia called Take 3 urges people to pick up three pieces of litter every time they leave a beach. Why not start your own program every time you go for a walk, using old gloves or a plastic bag to keep your hands clean?

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