

NEW HOMEOWNERS CHECKLIST

Here are eighteen things to check on or do immediately that will reduce the energy and maintenance costs of your home over the long haul.

1. Check the insulation in your attic – and install more if needed. If you have an unfinished attic, pop your head up there and take a look around. You should see some insulation up there, and there should be at least six inches of it everywhere (more if you live in the northern part of the United States). If there's inadequate insulation up there – or the insulation you have appears damaged – install new insulation. Here's a great guide from the Department of Energy on attic insulation, including specifics on how much you should have depending on where you live.

2. Lower the temperature on your hot water heater down to 120 degrees Fahrenheit (55 degrees Celsius). This is the optimum temperature for your hot water heater. Most people do not utilize water that's hotter than that, and thus energy used to keep the water that hot isn't effective. Lower the temperature, save some on your energy bill, and you'll never skip a beat.

3. Toss a water heater blanket over that hot water heater as well. While most modern hot water heaters are well-insulated, some are insulated better than others and many older heaters aren't insulated well at all. A small investment in a blanket for your water heater will slowly and gradually save you money on your heating bill over time by keeping the heat in the water instead of letting it spread slowly out into your utility closet.

4. Install ceiling fans in most rooms. Ceiling fans are a low-energy way to keep air moving in your home. Because of the air circulation effect, you can get away with keeping your thermostat a degree or two higher in summer and a degree or two lower in winter, netting a rather large savings. A while back, I wrote a guide to maximizing ceiling fan use – most importantly, the air directly below the fan should be blowing down on you in the summer and should be pulled upwards away from you in the winter – you can use the reversal switch on your fan to switch between the modes.

5. Wrap exposed water pipes with insulation. Exposed hot water pipes lose heat as they move water from your heater to your faucet. Insulating them makes a two to four degree difference in the temperature of the water and also allows hot water to reach your faucet faster. Check the pipes into and out of your hot water heater first, as the first three feet out of the heater (and the last few feet of inlet water) are key. Use good quality pipe insulation for the job – it's actually quite simple. Find out more about water pipe insulation at the EERE website.

6. Install a programmable thermostat – and learn how to use it. A programmable thermostat allows you to schedule automatic increases and decreases in your home's temperature. This lets your house naturally warm (or cool in the winter) while you're at work or asleep, saving quite a bit of energy use, and then when it comes time for you to actively use the house, the thermostat automatically adjusts the temperature of your home back to what you prefer. Such devices save money on cooling in the summer and heating in the winter.

7. Hang a clothes rack in your laundry room (or, better yet, an outdoor clothesline). A clothes dryer can really eat up your energy costs, but it's convenient for many people. Battle that convenience (and save money) by hanging a clothes rack from the wall in the laundry room and use it for some items – t-shirts and underwear dry great on clothes racks. If you can hang up 20% of the clothes in a load on this rack, you can get away with running the dryer 20% less than before, saving you cash. Even better: if you can, install a clothes line outside where the wind can catch it and hang most of your clothes outside.

8. Check all toilets and under-sink plumbing for leaks or constant running – and check faucets, too. Do a survey of the plumbing in your home before you settle in. If you find a toilet is running constantly, it's going to cost you money – here's how to easily fix that constantly-running toilet. You should also peek under the basin of all sinks in your home, just to make sure there aren't any leaks. Got a leaky faucet? You should repair or replace any of those, because the drip-drip-drip of water is also a drip-drip-drip of money; not to mention the terrible interplay between mold and home insurance.

9. Replace your air-handling filter. When you first move in, you almost always need to replace the air-handling filter (don't worry, it's easy to do – it takes about ten seconds). Go down to your air-handling unit, find where the filter is (it's almost always a large rectangle), and mark down the measurements (printed around the edges). Then, go to the hardware store and pick up a few of these, then go home and install one of them, replacing the old one. An outdated filter not only doesn't filter as well, it also has a negative impact on air flow, meaning your air handling system has to work harder to pump out lower quality air.

10. Make sure the vents in all rooms are clear of dust and obstructions. None of the vents in your home should be covered or blocked by anything – doing that makes your heating and cooling work overtime. You should also peek into all of your vents and make sure they're as dust-free as possible, and brush them out if you see any dust bunnies. This improves air flow into the room, reducing the amount of blowing that needs to happen.

11. Mark any cracks in the basement with dated masking tape. Many homes have a few small cracks in their basement walls from the settling of the foundation and the weight of the house. In a stable home, the small cracks aren't growing at all – they're safe. If they're growing, however, you'll save a ton of money by getting the

problem addressed now rather than later. Take some masking tape and cover up the end of any cracks you notice inside or outside, and write today's date on the tape. Then, in a few months, check the tape – if you see a crack growing out of the end of the tape, you might have a problem and should call a specialist now before the problem gets out of hand.

12. Install CFL and LED light bulbs in some locations. CFL and LED bulbs can save you a lot of money on energy use over the long haul, plus they have much longer lives than normal incandescent bulbs. Consider installing some in various places – we usually use CFLs for hall lighting and LED bulbs for closet lighting (though LED bulbs are improving all the time...).

13. Choose energy efficient appliances, even if you have to pay more up front. Unless you were lucky enough to buy a fully furnished home, you'll likely have to do some appliance shopping. Focus on reliability and energy efficiency above all, even if that seriously increases the cost you have to pay up front. A refrigerator that uses little energy and lasts twenty years is far, far cheaper over the long run than a fridge that runs for seven years and guzzles electricity. (If you're worried about the up-front cost, check out tip #17.)

14. Set up your home electronics with a SmartStrip or two. Looking forward to getting your television, cable box, DVD player, sound system, and video game console set up? When you do it, set things up with proper surge protection (to protect your equipment). You might also want to consider a SmartStrip, which allows the on-off status of one device (say, the television) to control whether or not there's power flowing to other devices (say, the DVD player or the video game console). Having the power cut automatically from such auxiliary devices can save a lot of money over time, especially since many such devices eat quite a bit of power as they sit there in standby mode, constantly draining your money.

15. Air-seal your home. Look for any places where air may be leaking directly into or out of your home. These aren't just air leaks – they're money leaks. Thankfully, fixing small air leaks is pretty easy – here's a great Department of Energy guide to caulking and weatherstripping, which will keep such air leaks from costing you.

16. Plant shade trees near your house. Shade trees naturally cool your home during those warm summer months, reducing the amount of direct rays that hit your house. Lowering the external temperature of your home saves significantly on your cooling bills during the summer, plus it increases your property value. Plant them now, so they'll grow and shade your house sooner.

17. Take advantage of tax benefits for any improvements you make. For starters, there's the first time home buyer tax credit, which is essentially an interest-free \$7,500 loan from the federal government for new homeowners. This is perfect

money to help you with fixes you may need to make when you move in, like buying good appliances or putting in shade trees. Similarly, if you make energy-based improvements to your home in 2009, you can receive up to \$500 in tax credit for that purchase, essentially making things like insulation tax free. Your state may have even more benefits, so be aware of all of these when you invest money improving the efficiency of your home.

18. Develop a home maintenance checklist - and run through it for the first time. One final tip - create a home maintenance checklist. This list should include regular home maintenance tasks that you'd want to do on a monthly or quarterly or annual basis. Then, make it a habit to run through the items on this list each month. Doing so will extend the life of almost everything in your home, saving you buckets of money over time.

For more information on buying or selling a home, visit <http://bethsellshomes.com> today!

