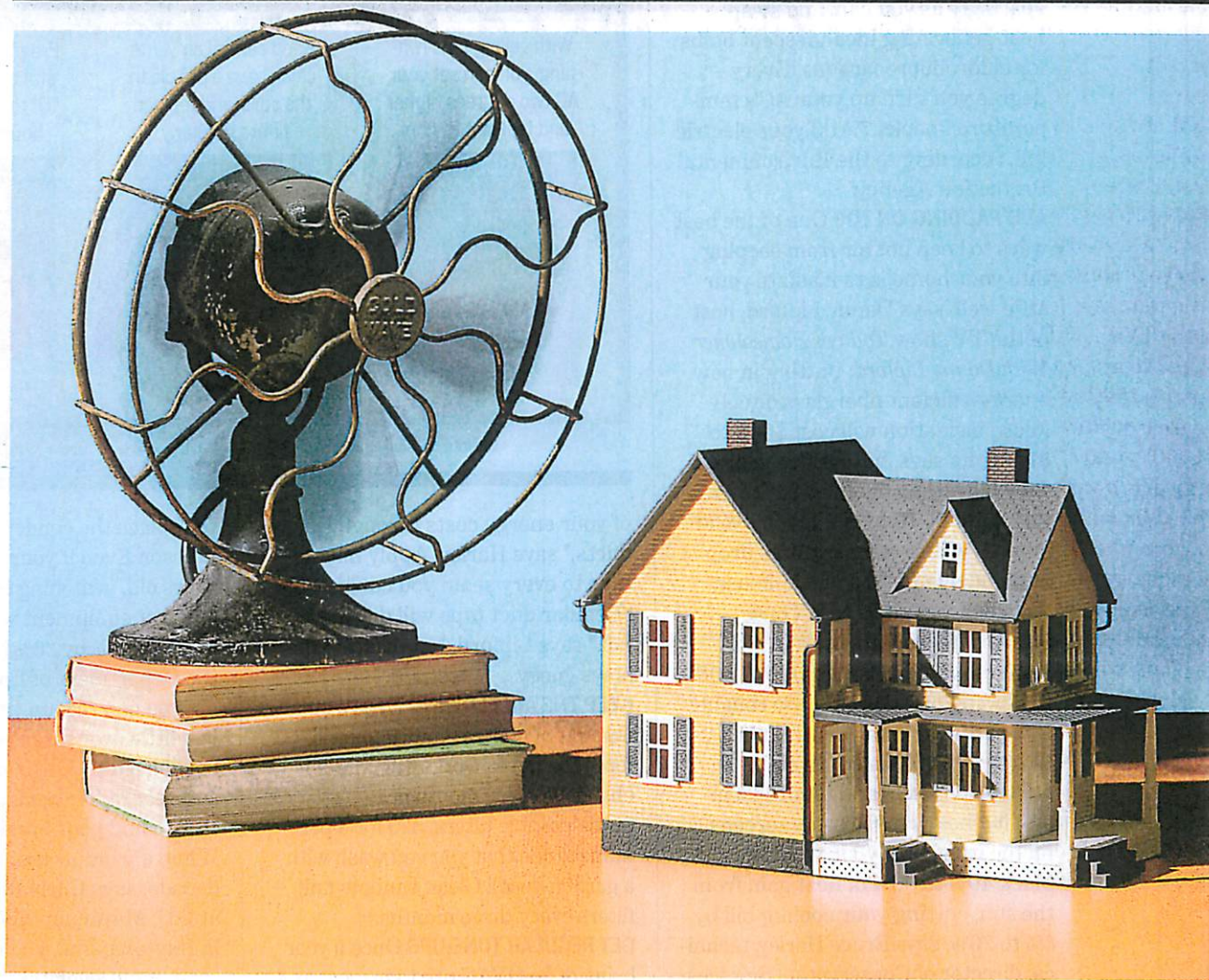


HOMIE

43 THE RIGHT WAY TO INVEST IN YOUR GARDEN



Stay Cool for Less

Don't get blown away by high air-conditioning bills. Follow these tips for cutting the cost of chilling out.

By KAREN CHENEY

Photograph by JASON HINDLEY

WARMER WEATHER MEANS RELIEF from the high cost of heating your home. Enjoy it while you can. Your cooling tab could soon have you breaking a sweat. Air conditioning accounts for nearly 60% of Americans' summer electric bills. "Nothing puts greater stress on the energy grid than cooling," says Ronnie Kweller of the Alliance to Save Energy. These simple tune-ups and smart upgrades can help you ease the stress on your home energy budget. →

LIGHTEN YOUR AC'S LOAD

You can make your AC run more efficiently by changing your habits. Key home upgrades can help too. **ACT COOLER** Close the blinds on sunny days, run hot appliances as sparingly as you can, and swap heat-generating incandescent bulbs for chlorofluorocarbons. Every degree you turn up your AC's temperature knocks 7% off your electric bill, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

ADD PADDING ON TOP One of the best ways to keep hot air from seeping into your home is to insulate your attic well, says Danny Lipford, host of the TV show *Today's Homeowner With Danny Lipford*. Putting in new energy-efficient fiberglass or cellulose insulation will cost \$600 to \$1,500, he says, but reduce your energy bills by as much as 20% a year.

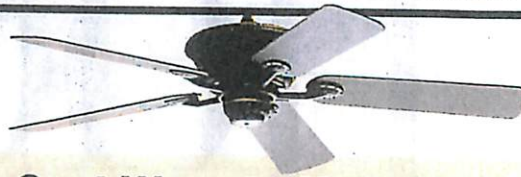
PUT YOUR AC TO SLEEP If you live in an area where temperatures drop at night, switch to a whole-house fan when you go to bed. These industrial-strength, built-in ceiling fans, which cost \$600 to \$1,500 (including installation), use roughly 10% of the power of central air.

BLOCK THE SUN In super-sunny states like Texas and Colorado, installing heavy mesh solar screens on the outside of your windows can block 40% to 80% of heat gain from the sun, cutting your cooling bill by 5% to 20%, says Bruce Harley, technical director of Conservation Services Group in Westborough, Mass. Cost: \$60 to \$90 per screen.


DON'T IGNORE MAINTENANCE

Even a new AC system needs frequent attention to run efficiently.

PREVENT LEAKS "People think of windows and doors as being the leaky part of the house, but you could be losing far more—from 10% to 40%—

**Low-Cost Ways to Keep Your Cool**

These three simple moves can produce big savings on your AC bills.

 **CEILING FANS**

With ceiling fans running, you can set your AC two degrees higher and feel just as cool.

COST

\$40 TO \$200
per room

SAVINGS
14%


 **VENTS**

Keep central air vents clear, have a pro clean the coils, and replace filters regularly.

COST

\$110
a year

SAVINGS
9%

 **THERMOSTATS**

Program your thermostat to raise the temperature 10° to 15° for the hours you're gone.

COST

\$90
for thermostats

SAVINGS
10%

SOURCES: Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency, National Air Duct Cleaners Association

of your energy costs through leaky ducts," says Harley. Apply mastic tape to every seam you can reach. "Regular duct tape will dry out and fail," says Lipford, but mastic tape stays gooey.

KEEP THE AIR FLOWING Even a small amount of dust on your filter will force the fan to work overtime, so change it every month or two (\$5 for disposable filters, \$20 for a permanent one that you can wash with a garden hose). Clean window-unit filters every three months.

GET REGULAR TUNE-UPS Once a year bring in an HVAC pro to inspect and clean the system. Spring, however, is the peak time for servicing. If you can time your annual checkups for the fall, you should pay \$100 to \$150 for the visit, a 5% to 10% discount.

TRADE IN YOUR OLD MODEL

Central air-conditioning systems typically last 15 years, but heavy users may want to upgrade sooner. **SPRING FOR NEW GEAR** Assuming you keep the same ductwork in place, you'll spend \$2,500 to \$4,000

to replace the condenser and compressor. Even if your AC is only years old, switching to more efficient equipment will cut the cost of running it by 20% to 40%, says the Department of Energy. In a mix you can recoup your investment in a little over three years; in a bad mix you'll need 10. Go to energystar.gov and search for "central air calculator" to find your break-even point. While a window unit can last a decade, says Chris Rossi, manager at D.G. Meyer, an HVAC contractor in Daytona, Fla., you may want to swap it out every six to seven years if you run it frequently.

BE EFFICIENT You want a seasonal energy-efficiency rating (SEER) of at least 13 for central air (for window units, look for an energy rating of 10). Every step up in SEER improves efficiency by 5%. A 14 SEER system will also do a better job at keeping the temperature consistently comfortable, says Lipford. If you opt for a 14.5- or 16-SEER (depends on the type), you'll qualify for a \$300 tax credit in 2011. ■