

ASK THE INSPECTOR COLUMN FOR NOVEMBER 18, 2015

HEADLINE: GET READY FOR THE COLD

Just about every home improvement column these days hit upon the most common winterization tips and they are a good reminder. This week's column will hit upon some of the not so common reminders.

Full length drapes on windows are a pleasant decorating touch; too often, however, they are too long and contribute to temperature differences in some rooms. If they are over a forced air duct, I recommend that they are set at 4-6 inches off the floor. If you really like the floor to ceiling look, add the plastic curved deflectors that are held in place with small magnets on your floor registers and make sure the drapes fit behind these deflectors.

A trick to telling whether your forced air heating is even or not is simple and easy. Using a green garbage bag and a metal coat hanger, form the hanger to the size of your floor registers. Using Tuck-Tape, as duct tape will not stay, fit the bag around the frame and tape securely. Turn your forced air furnace on fan only and, using a watch with a second hand, hold the frame over the floor duct and time the number of seconds it takes to fill the bag, record and do every register. You may be surprised how much difference there is and a blockage will show up immediately.

If your home has electric heat, the drapes should be no less than six inches above the radiant baseboard heaters. Another small tip if you have electric baseboard heaters is to remove the cover and, using the siphon attachment for your vacuum cleaner, slowly and carefully go over the "fins" on the heaters. The buildup of dust over time can adversely affect their efficiency.

While we are on drapes, window shades, especially the honeycomb style are proven effective to retain internal heat in a home. Opening your south face window drapes or shades during the day and leaving the north face closed lets the benefits of solar heat into the home, while keeping the cold of the north at bay.

Of late, installation and use of programmable thermostats has been recommended. During inspections we use these to test the furnace. I am able to see the settings and am surprised how many do not use all of the features. It's a proven fact that every degree of set-back saves upwards of 3% in heating costs. That said, extreme setbacks work in the reverse; they take time to recover to a

comfortable temperature. A daily setback of greater than 4-5 degrees is counterproductive, especially during a cold period for most homes.

A steady stream of marketing by home improvement stores speaks to weather-stripping windows and doors. They are right, as ill fitted openings are a major source of air loss. When I am checking the home forced air system with a laser thermometer, I often pass over the exterior doors. The threshold is a forgotten area in many homes. A simple door sweep attached to the bottom of the inside of the door works wonders.

This is the time of year that the sale of caulking, foam weather-stripping tape and kits, along with spray foam, hit their peak. While spray foam has its benefits, the quality of spray foam really makes a difference. If you are planning to do a lot, look into purchasing a foam gun and use commercial grade cans of spray foam. The difference is worth it. Recently, a neighbour had a retired carpenter friend help him put in a new entrance door in their 100 plus year old home. He was over to our shop to borrow a couple of tools and asked me to have a look at the opening. They were having a tough time and ended up with a wider space on both sides of the door than they hoped. I have fitted fibreglass pieces in openings like this and, using the "trade-grade" of foam with a gun, slowly built up on top of the batt insulation on both sides of the door. It's an old trick for old home openings where the walls are wider thanks to added siding. It takes a couple of applications, but works well. The carpenter marvelled at the foam buildup. He commented that the typical shelf cans with the little nozzle would never do that and hold its shape without sagging. If it's a small job, the cans with the little plastic tube do work, make sure you buy the right kind, as there are two. One is for large openings and expands a lot, but, unfortunately, it can warp a door or window frame and I don't think that this foam is as air tight as the trade grade. The other one is for windows and doors and it does not expand a lot, which is good, but if the opening is wider, this foam will sag quickly.

While we are on air seal, too often this is forgotten before insulation is added; insulation will not block air leaks. A recent study New York State study found that nearly 45% of homes over 20 years old lacked enough attic insulation and I am sure that holds true here, too. Ceiling lights, fans and any opening in or near the ceiling below the attic should be air sealed first. There are proper insulation covers for hex boxes used for lights; you can make up boxes and fit them with rigid foam insulation or simply use spray foam. While this may take time, it will have a major effect on improving the benefit of that new insulation you are adding to the attic.

Using these tips, along with the usual recommendations, should have you cozier this winter.

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