

Hot water heating has advantages

Hot water heat, also known as hydronic heat, is the most comfortable, most economical and healthiest home heat there is, according to the Hydronic Institute, a non-profit research group.

Yet, according to the Institute, about 90 percent of new home construction has either electric or forced air heat installed. Why? One strong motivator is low up-front cost for the builder. But forced air or electric heat, the Institute says, can cost a homeowner an additional 50 percent or more in fuel bills while failing to provide the comfort advantages of hot water heat. For climates where heating is a principal concern, they advise, prospective home buyers and remodelers should lean strongly toward hydronic heat.

Builders sell homes on features, but a new home's heating system is rarely discussed. The easiest and cheapest system is the one that usually goes in, whether it makes sense for the climate or not.

For example, many people want central air conditioning these days and central air conditioning and hot air heat can be run through the same ductwork, making the installation easier and cheaper. But warm air rises and cool air sinks, so siting ductwork for one makes the performance of the other suffer.

Hydronic systems are also a problem, since forced air heat is basically a warm draft. When it's on, it's really on, blowing hot air at you, noisily. When it's off, it's completely off, and you'll notice a rapid cooling off of the room that continues until the blower comes on again.

Heating a house with hot air also means you need a separate system to heat domestic hot water for bathing, dishes, etc. Heating domestic hot water is said to be the second largest cost of energy in an average home.

Electric heat, while quieter and somewhat more comfortable than forced air, is certainly the most expensive way you can heat a home. Electric heat works a round 29 percent efficiency. To illustrate, the Institute offers these recent comparative heating costs for a year in the Northeast — \$4500 for electricity, \$2200 for propane gas, \$1551 for natural gas and \$988 for fuel oil.

Modern hydronic systems, which can be fired by oil or gas, distribute hot water from an efficient central boiler to baseboard units located around the perimeter of rooms. These provide gentle, silent heat that penetrates deeply. New oil and gas hot water boilers are compact and extremely efficient, running as high as 85 percent efficiency.

The Hydronics Institute recommends that prospective custom home owners talk with their architect or builder and installing a

hydronic system at the outset. If you are looking at existing new construction, they suggest that the heating system should be a prime consideration in the selection process — you may have to live with it for a long time.

For remodelers and homeowners adding additional hydronic systems are simpler to install than you may realize. Use of flexible tubing and compact boiler units make hydronic systems ideal for modernization and expansion. Where forced air systems already exist, there's no need to re-

move the existing ductwork, which can still be used for air conditioning. The first step is to call in a licensed heating contractor and ask him to evaluate your present system and suggest ways to improve heating efficiency and reduce costs using hydronic heat.

For more information about the benefits of hot water heat, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope for the free "Homebuyer's Guide to Hot Water Heating" from the Hydronics Institute, PO Box 218, Dept. 511, Berkeley Heights, NJ 07022.

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