

CUT YOUR UTILITY BILLS

3 Steps to an Efficient Attic

Q: When I add insulation to my attic, how do I ensure it's done correctly?

A: Your attic is often the area you can get the most bang for your buck on energy-efficiency investments. Insulation is just one part of the energy-efficient attic puzzle.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind as you prepare to make your attic more efficient.

Step 1: Sealing

Warm air often leaks out of the attic in winter or into the home during summer. Trouble spots include anything that comes through the attic floor, such as recessed lights, the chimney, the attic hatch and pipes, and ducts or wires coming through the attic floor.

It is best to properly seal these trouble spots before adding or improving insulation. Invest a small amount of money in the necessary supplies—caulk, expanding foam or weatherstripping—to seal any air leaks in your attic.

Step 2: Ventilation

Many attics are under-ventilated, which lets moisture and heat build up. Moisture causes harmful mold and wood rot.

During summer, a poorly ventilated attic is prone to overheating, which can bake shingles and shorten their life. During winter, a warm attic can

This column was co-written by Pat Keegan and Brad Thiessen of Collaborative Efficiency. For more energy tips, go to collaborativeefficiency.com/energytips.



A well-insulated attic can help keep your home warm in winter and cool in summer.

ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY OZGUR COSKUN

melt snow on the roof, causing it to run into your gutters and then freeze, causing ice dams.

Proper attic ventilation lets air flow from a low point to a high point. This is usually done by installing soffit vents and insulation baffles around the perimeter, plus vents near the peak of the roof. If there is no way to install enough attic ventilators, install an attic fan to provide mechanical assistance to exhausting overheated air.

Step 3: Insulation

The three main types of insulation for attics are loose-fill, batt and rigid. Whichever you choose, it must provide a high enough level of insulation for your region, measured in R-value.

Batt and rigid insulation

often have the R-value printed on them. Loose-fill, which is blown in, is the most common for attic floors. Its R-value is approximately its depth in inches multiplied by 2.8.

Generally speaking, your attic should have 14 to 24 inches of loose-fill insulation if you live in a northern state, and 11 to 14 inches if you're in a southern state. You can find the recommended level for your region at energy.gov.

If your loose-fill insulation is less than the recommended amount, it should be easy to add more on top of it—as long as there are no moisture, rodent, ant or termite problems.

If your existing loose-fill insulation was installed before 1990, it could be vermiculite, which may be contaminated with asbestos. Asbestos can cause cancer when particles are released into the air, so it's a good idea to have the insulation tested. If it's contaminated, have it removed by a

professional before beginning work.

Seal and insulate attic walls that border conditioned space, such as skylight openings.

Some of these steps can be challenging, so consider hiring a professional. If you're a do-it-yourself pro and decide to do some of the work on your own, be aware of potential hazards. Disturbing old wiring can cause shorts in your electrical system, and roofing nails will often pierce the attic ceiling. Another danger is stepping off the rafters.

Years ago, I (Pat) decided to do some work in my attic on a hot afternoon. The heat must have gotten to me, because I slipped and crashed through the attic floor. My daughters were quite surprised to see my legs dangling from the ceiling, with broken sheetrock and insulation everywhere. What a mess!

Always remember safety when tackling your projects. ■





Chinese witch hazel offers yellow petals into late winter. ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY MARC

Brighten Landscapes With Winter Color

Plants that bravely bloom in winter come into color when we need it most, so take advantage and plant plenty.

Many gardeners are familiar with late-winter bloomers such as forsythia and crocus, but Oregon State University Extension experts suggest planting less-common trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants for all eye levels of the garden.

Some of the boldest are witch hazel—a small tree or large shrub with buttery yellow to red flowers that typically bloom in December, January or February. Two species—American witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) and Ozark witch hazel (*H. vernalis*)—are native, while *H. japonica* and *H. mollis* are from Asia.

Perhaps the most popular is the Chinese witch hazel (*H. mollis*), with its bright yellow flowers and colorful fall show. Hybrid forms also are available, such as *H. x intermedia* “Arnold Promise,” “Jelena” and “Diane.”

Plant witch hazel in full or filtered

sunlight and provide summer irrigation for best success. They are hardy in USDA Zones 5 or higher.

For blooms in December and January, look for another small tree or large shrub, the sasanqua camellia (*Camellia sasanqua*). Unlike the more familiar Japanese camellias, the sasanqua camellia blooms earlier and grows in an open form. Like its more common relative, it has been bred for many colorful flowers, from pure white to pinks and reds. This evergreen shrub is hardy to USDA Zone 7. It prefers rich soil with regular summer irrigation.

Another large shrub called wintersweet is known botanically as *Chimonanthus praecox*. As the name suggests, this January bloomer produces a powerful and sweet fragrance. Its flowers are waxy and light- to medium-yellow. Wintersweet grows to USDA Zone 6. It is deciduous, grows from multiple trunks, and prefers sun to light shade and regular watering in well-drained soil.

For fragrance on a smaller scale, try sweetbox in the genus *Sarcococca* from China. Several species and hybrids are available, but the most common is sold as *S. humilis* or *S. confusa*. Though the flowers don’t make much of a visual impact, they are strongly fragrant and waft for yards on a winter day, so plant this January-February bloomer near a walkway or doorway you use often.

The flowers are followed by attractive, shiny, black berries that persist for much of the year. These evergreen shrubs—which grow 3 to 5 feet tall—prefer part shade, rich soil and regular irrigation. They are hardy in USDA Zones 7-9.

Another shrub from China is winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*). It blooms off and on between November and February. Some forms are hardy to USDA Zone 6. This species is not fragrant, but has bright yellow flowers and is deciduous and almost vine-like.

Hardy cyclamen (*Cyclamen coum*) flowers in November or December, followed by colorful variegated leaves. Flowers are a medium to deep pink, and each flowering stem uncurls like a corkscrew as it emerges. The plant grows from an underground storage unit called a corm, which is often sold with fall bulbs. Many nurseries offer them as potted plants as well.

Make sure to shop by species names as less-hardy species—often called florist cyclamen—also are available. This species comes from Middle Eastern countries and is hardy to USDA Zone 5.

Commonly called Lenton rose or Christmas rose, hellebores come in several colors and foliage forms. They are sturdy and grow 1 to 2 feet tall, with large flowers in white, yellow, green, pink or purple. Some of the species are hardy to USDA Zone 4. In most places, you can expect blooming to begin by late February. ■



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