The mild temperature of fall make it a good time to consider a check up on your air conditioning and heating system to be ready for winter.

The air handler, the compressor, filter, ductwork, and thermostat are all parts of the heating, ventilation and air conditioning or HVAC system. If one part does not work as well as it should, the package deal is not efficient and you could be throwing money out the window, literally. In addition, poor functioning systems can cause poor indoor air quality with high humidity, dust and mold and make you sick.

The easiest maintenance is to change your air filter on a monthly basis. Be sure to use the correct filter size so air does not escape past it. Pick a day of the month or write the date you install it on the frame. Pleated filters or HEPA type filters remove germs and fine dust particles and help clean the air and prevent damage to the moving parts of the unit.

It is important to keep our moist Florida air outside so keep doors and windows closed to allow the HVAC system to dehumidify the indoor air. Be sure you have good weather stripping around doors and windows. If you can see daylight around the edges, you should seal the gaps.

If you must open door and windows, limit it to the few days a year when we get cool fronts from the north blowing through with dry air. Check the weather report and wait until the dew point temperature outside, not the temperature, is below 55 degrees F. I assure you, this is not often.

Keep indoor air dry by exhausting moist air outside your house, not into the attic. Cover pots when cooking and use an exhaust fan when cooking and showering to pull the moisture outside. Some come with timers so you don’t have to remember to turn them off.

High humidity supports mold and dust mite growth so it is recommended to keep indoor relative humidity between 30 to 50 %. The lower the water vapor, the lower the humidity and you feel more comfortable.

Air conditioners remove water vapor from the air and if properly sized lower indoor humidity to an acceptable level. Water vapor in the air condenses on the cold coils inside the air handler and then drips into a tray and ultimately into a pipe that drains outside. The pvc condensate drain pipe will drip water whenever the unit is working and must empty at least one foot away from the base of the house to prevent pest problems such as termites.

If the drain clogs with algae, water backs up in the pipe and leaks onto the floor or into the attic resulting in major damage and repair costs. Keep the drain flowing to prevent damage to the ceilings, carpets and wood or laminate floors.

One local HVAC service company suggests using a shop vac several times a year to clear the condensation drain line and any slime build up. Just hook it up to the outside drain and use something to make a tight seal so it will create a vacuum and purge the line.

Another service company recommends that in order to keep the lines clean, you should pour a cup of bleach into the condensate drain each month at the same time you change your air filter. The bleach kills the slimy growth and keeps the lines clean so they don’t clog and cause water damage. The access point is a removable cap on the pvc drain line. If you cannot locate it, consult with an air conditioning service company BEFORE you have a problem.
Annual maintenance also includes cleaning the coils of dirt and dust. This can be a do it yourself job, but be sure to check the manual for location and safety tips first. Fireants sometimes cause shorts in outdoor electrical connections and contact points for motors so it is a good idea to apply fireant bait around the outdoor unit to kill any fireant colonies that are nearby. Never apply sprays to the electrical or fan unit.

Be sure the ducts are installed and sealed properly. There is no benefit to having a very efficient new system forcing cooled or heated air into your attic or garage. Ducts should be insulated and sealed with mastic, not duct tape. All connections to the unit and to the supply and return openings should be sealed as well. If the duct system has leaks, it could be sucking hot polluted air from the garage or hot dusty air from the attic.

Certified energy raters can inspect the system for leaks. Some use sophisticated smoke machines to help pinpoint exactly where leaks are so they can be fixed. Call the UF/IFAS Extension Office to find an energy rater or go to http://www.fsec.ucf.edu/ to search for certified professionals to help you evaluate your system and save energy in many different ways.

To avoid emergencies with your HVAC system, schedule maintenance now. That’s when you need it most.

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