PLANT LIFE COLUMN

ENERGY CONSERVATION

My most recent electric bills have been triple digits. The cold weather had the meter cranking. If the fear of power outages has not moved us to conserve electricity, maybe the electric bills will.

Each one of us has developed behavior patterns that influence our electric use. If we evaluate and adjust our activities and save a little energy every day, the result will be lower power use and therefore, lower electric bills. Energy conserving habits can become as common place as energy wasting ones with practice.

At home, the major power guzzlers are air conditioning and water heaters. Here are a few changes you can make to cut your power use without crimping your style.

Most modern homes have central air conditioning. Adjust your thermostat a few degrees cooler in the winter and a few degrees warmer in the summer. According to Kissimmee Utility Authority, setting the cooling temperature to 75°F instead of the recommended 78°F uses 18% more electricity. If you chill the room down to 72°F, you are using nearly 40% more kilowatts than if you have the temperature set at 78°F.

Ceiling fans help you feel more comfortable at the higher temperature, but only run them when you are in the room. They do not cool the air, they just move it, but that movement helps you feel cooler.

If you are away from home most of the day, consider adjusting your thermostat to a slightly higher temperature while you are gone, and then lower it to feel cooler when you get home. If it is hard to remember to adjust the setting when you leave and return home, consider replacing your existing thermostat with a new model with an automatic timer.

Programmable thermostats are available at home improvement centers and electric supply houses. The thermostat must be matched to your equipment. Installation is not very complicated but safety procedures must be followed to prevent electric shock. Consult an air conditioning service company or an electrician for assistance if you are not a "do-it-your-selfer".

Replace air conditioning filters monthly or as recommended by the manufacturer. You should also have the unit cleaned annually. Dirt and dust insulate the cooling coils and causes the unit to run less efficiently, wasting electricity.

If your air conditioner is more than 10 years old, consider replacing it with an upgraded system with a seasonal energy efficiency rating of at least SEER 12. The higher the number, the more efficient the unit and the more energy saved, however, as numbers increase, so does the price of the unit. Also look for SHR value of 0.7 or lower for Florida. The Sensible Heat Ratio is a measure of the equipment’s ability to remove humidity.

Another way to reduce energy needed for air conditioning is to reduce the amount of solar heating getting into your home. The best method is to block sunlight from the outside. Whether through landscaping, shade trees, trellis, awnings or shutters, try to prevent the hot west and east sun from hitting walls and windows.

Proper landscaping can shade your home on critical west and east walls. Several University of Florida publications contain hints for landscaping for energy efficiency. Contact the Osceola Master Gardeners at epabon5@ufl.edu for E-mail links to helpful fact sheets.

When purchasing appliances, look for the Energy Star label. The Environmental Protection Agency has developed a voluntary program where manufacturers can have appliances rated for energy efficiency. Energy Star appliances are more efficient than similar models which do not meet EPA's standards. For
more information on Energy Star ratings call 1-888-STARYES or check the web at http://www.energystar.gov/

If the appliance does not have the Energy Star label, ask to see the yellow energy use label. It will compare your chosen model with similar models and show you if your appliance uses more or less energy than others. It will also indicate the anticipated cost per year to operate the appliance. Choose energy efficient appliances and save money every time you use them.

The University of Florida has just printed a manual for building contractors and homeowners which has clear explanations of many factors influencing energy use. "Energy Efficient Building Construction in Florida" is available for $22 plus shipping and handling. A sample copy and order forms are available from the Osceola County Extension office at (321) 697-3000 or order by credit card at 1-800-226-1764.

For more information on energy conservation, check out the links on our natural resources web page at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu/natrec.html

Changing energy use patterns will never get any easier. Start now. Saving dollars makes sense.

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