

Hot buys

Pick the right space heater to keep the cold at bay

By Eleanor Pierce / *The Bulletin*

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Temperatures are starting to dip in Central Oregon, and if a chill is creeping into your home, you may be thinking about how best to warm things up. Portable space heaters are one option for keeping the cold at bay, but whether a space heater is a good idea for your home depends on your needs.

Robert Hamerly, general manager of Green Savers, a local contractor specializing in home energy-efficiency tests, says people can potentially save money on their energy bills using space heaters. One example is heating the room you sleep in at night.

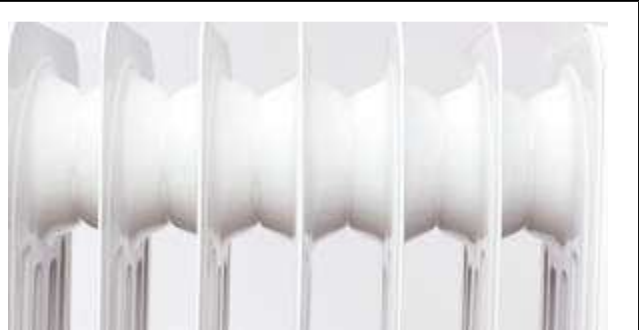
"If you're in your room for eight hours (using a space heater), you don't have to heat the whole house to 68 degrees. If you can keep the furnace at 55, yes, potentially you can save money there," Hamerly said. But if you're looking to heat an entire, multi-room home, portable space heaters probably are not the best tool.

Here are descriptions of the various types of portable heaters, and some advantages and disadvantages of each.

Your overall heating bill

Generally, the electricity usage of a space heater is measured in watts. To figure the cost of running your space heater, use this formula: Watts divided by 1,000, times rate per kilowatt hour, times the number of hours the unit will run, equals cost.

For instance, the DeLonghi Ceramic Heater DCH 1030, which was available at Bed, Bath and Beyond for \$24.99 last week, has a high setting of 1,500 watts. Oregon's electricity pricing structure is complicated, but Pacific Power charges most residential customers about \$0.08 per kilowatt hour, which means it will cost about 12 cents per hour to run the heater continuously on high.



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Oil-filled heaters



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Radiant heaters

Also consider that many heaters cycle on and off. Some heaters, like oil-filled units, will still provide lasting warmth when they're off, but others heat quickly, though the warmth may dissipate when the unit is shut off.

Because the efficiency of space heaters is so dependent on how they are used, Energy Trust of Oregon Planning and Evaluation Director Fred Gordon says the organization doesn't offer rebates on the units.

Jan Schaeffer, special projects contractor with Energy Trust, said that rather than heating only one room at night with a portable space heater, "You'd save even more if you put on an extra comforter and turned the heat down to 55."

Robert Hamerly suggested a few other ways to maximize comfort and save some money on your heating bills this winter.

"Change or clean the air filter in your furnace," he said. "It pays big dividends as far as more efficient heating."

He also suggested investing in programmable thermostats.

"You can get one and get it wired for under \$100," he said, and "that will substantially lower your bills."

Your power company may also have information on saving energy; call or check the company's Web site.

Colleen Neel, energy and weatherization programs manager at NeighborImpact, said the organization has a Weatherization Assistance Program in which people with low incomes can get help with furnace repairs. NeighborImpact also has several oil-filled space heaters they lend to anyone, regardless of income, for a maximum of 30 days.

Contact NeighborImpact at 541-316-2034 or at www.neighborimpact.org.

Heaters

Ceramic heaters

Cost: \$25-\$70



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Convection and mica heaters



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Ceramic heaters

Ceramic heaters are an increasingly popular option. Ceramic heaters cost around \$25 for a compact, simple model and \$70 for the top-of-the-line tower with a thermostat, touch-screen controls and remote.

These use a ceramic and aluminum heating element with a fan that blows air over the element and into the room. Because the ceramic and aluminum heat quickly, you can get a whole room warm relatively quickly with a larger ceramic heater. They're lighter than oil-filled heaters, making them easier to transport, and they stay cooler to the touch, making them less of a danger to children and pets.

Radiant heaters

Cost: \$15-\$400

These heaters work by sending out rays of sunlike heat from ribbon coils or quartz tubes. Some models, called parabolic heaters, use a disc to reflect the heat out into the room.

Radiant heaters vary in their design and cost from as little as \$15 to several hundred dollars for a sophisticated outdoor/indoor unit.

Radiant heaters warm up quickly, but you have to be within the line of sight of the heaters to feel their warmth. They do have the benefit of being able to offer warmth to one person in the room without warming up the space for others. The heating elements and reflective areas get very hot, making them a poor choice for households with children or pets.

Oil-filled heaters

Cost: \$40-\$60

These space heaters look like old-fashioned radiators, and generally cost between \$40 and \$65. Higher-priced models include features such as thermostats and digital controls.

Oil-filled heaters have a heating element inside that warms the oil (which never has to be changed) gradually. The unit becomes warm, heating the air around it. Once the oil is warmed, it stays warm for awhile, giving steady heat and thus increasing the unit's efficiency. They're also quiet, because they don't use fans.



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Oil-filled heaters

Safety first

Colleen Neel, of NeighborImpact, said people may be unknowingly using space heaters that have been recalled.

"Anyone who wants to find out if their space heater has been recalled can search the U.S. Consumer Protection Safety Commission's Web site at www.cpsc.gov or call them toll-free at 1-866-757-6649."

Neel also recommended that people in older homes should have a licensed electrician perform a safety check on their electrical systems.

"This is an inexpensive and valuable service for older homes."

Other safety tips for space heaters:

- Look for cool-touch handles and automatic shutoff when the heater tips over.
- Plug space heaters directly into an outlet, not into power strips or extension cords, because they can overheat and cause fires.
- Keep furniture, pillows, bedding, papers, clothes and curtains at least three feet from the front of the heater and away from the sides and rear. Do not block heater's air intake or exhaust source.
- Unless the heater is designed for outdoor or bathroom use, do not use in damp or wet areas. Parts in the heater may be damaged by moisture.

Oil-filled heaters are slow to heat a room, and their metal bodies become hot to the touch, so they shouldn't be left around small children. They also don't work well in drafty rooms or rooms with open designs, like rooms with vaulted ceilings.

• Place heater on a level, flat surface. Only use heater on table tops when specified by the manufacturer.
Source: The Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers www.heatersafety.org/english.html

Convection and mica heaters

Cost: \$40-\$100

Convection heaters work by blowing or pulling air over a heated surface. Rather than directing heat at a specific area, they heat entire rooms.

Like oil heaters, convection heaters provide slow, steady warmth for an entire room and don't generally work well in drafty or open spaces.

Convection heaters vary widely in design and price, from around \$40 to nearly \$100. Some of the newer models also use mica heating units, sometimes called "micathermic" heating. The mica heating panels are lightweight, and some can even be mounted to walls.

Higher -end models are often also equipped with thermostats, which can help maintain a consistent temperature.

Heater fans

Cost: \$15-\$30

Heater fans are the cheapest option for space heaters, starting at less than \$15.

These work by heating a metal coil inside cool-touch plastic and blowing the warm air out with a fan. They're small, portable, and they heat up quickly, but they're generally better for heating one area rather than a large room.

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