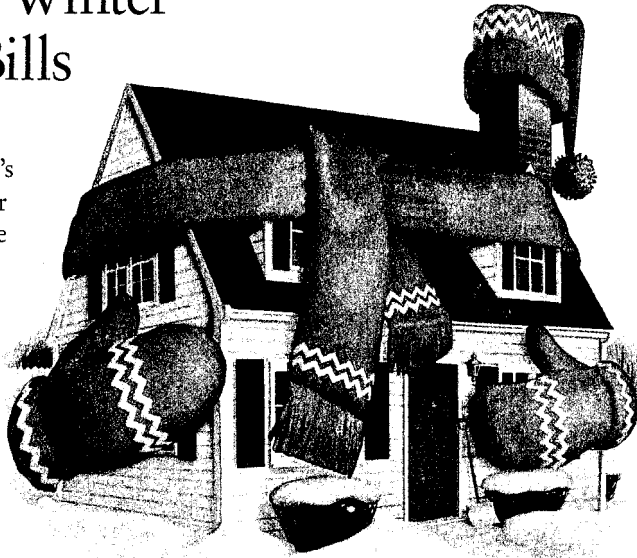


Beating Winter Energy Bills

It comes to the season's energy bills, Mother Nature appears to be along: This winter is expected about 3 degrees warmer than last winter. Unfortunately, energy prices didn't memo; according to the



Administration, the cost of heating oil is expected to increase 6 percent this winter with propane, natural gas and electricity prices also predicted to rise. Below, strategies for keeping energy bills unseasonably mild.

TAX CREDITS. The federal tax credit for some energy-friendly home improvements is set to expire next year, but homeowners still have until the end of the year to qualify. Potentially eligible items include adding insulation, installing energy-efficient HVAC equipment like electric heat pumps and furnaces (see more options at energysavers.gov/financial). The credit can add up quickly. Installing energy-efficient windows, for instance, qualifies for a tax credit of up to 30 percent of the cost, up to \$2,000. Plus, replacing less-efficient double-pane windows can save \$126 to \$180 a year in energy costs, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program.

TURN DOWN THE DIAL. It seems like a no-brainer, but just turning down the thermostat by 8 degrees at night or

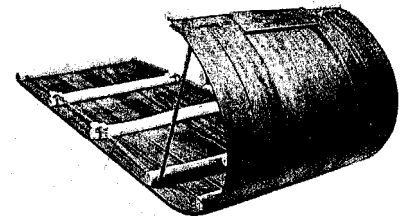
before going to work can save up to \$180 a year, assuming homeowners keep the regular temperature at 70 degrees or less in winter, according to Energy Star. Programmable thermostats, which start at about \$35 dollars, make this even easier. Some homeowners install these thermostats themselves (experts suggest keeping them away from drafts or heat sources), but hiring an installation pro can cost more than \$150.

PLANT A WINDBREAKER. The wind-blocking power of trees and shrubs is often overlooked when it comes to cutting heating costs. Arborvite, a type of dense evergreen, is one of the most popular trees for protecting homes against gusts, says Mark Mersch, chief financial officer for online retailer Nature Hills Nursery. A 2-foot tree can be found online for about \$20, notes Mersch, while nurseries sell larger trees for several hundred dollars. Still, a spokesperson for the Department of Energy recommends investing in a larger tree to maximize long-term savings and suggests planting it north or northwest of the home, leaving the south side open to capture the sun's warmth. —Anna Prior



Worth It

Meant for coasting down snowy hills or decorating cabin walls, the 48-inch-long **Mountain Boggan** (\$150) by Mountain Boy Sledworks features half-inch-thick basswood planks and a wide curl at the front for ample leg space. The 11-pound sled can be personalized with an engraved name plaque, and its weight capacity of 300 pounds can support two adults or three children.



Not Worth It

Unlike the Mountain Boggan, the 48-inch-long **Heirloom Collection Wooden Toboggan** (\$170) by Lucky Bums comes with a water-resistant seating pad. But despite weighing in at a heftier 14 pounds, its ash planks are a less substantial quarter-of-an-inch thick. The company says it's satisfied with the durability of the product, and the sled's wooden cross pieces add strength. —Jami Makan

