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Warming Trends

Inflated gas and oil prices may have Westchester residents shivering, but new developments in home heating provide options for increased efficiency. By Laura Joseph Mogil

SUSAN COHEN MOVED INTO HER JUST-BUILT BRIARCLIFF MANOR COLONIAL home during the spring thaw, so it took several seasons before the master bathroom became a no-go zone. But once the temperature dropped in the late fall of 2000, the air in the 300-square-foot bathroom followed suit.

Despite the Jacuzzi, marble countertops, tile floors, and vaulted ceiling, the Cohens' master bathroom became a room to avoid. "I dreaded getting out of the shower because the room was so freezing," she says.

The Cohens tried to solve the problem by adding insulation in the closet walls behind the shower. Then they placed a space heater in the garage, followed by more insulation in the garage ceiling directly underneath the master bathroom. When the shower and toilet pipes continued to repeatedly freeze, the Cohens decided to bring in Millwood-based Armstrong Plumbing & Heating to install a radiant heat system in the space between the bathroom floor and garage ceiling.

At last—success! "I no longer have to put on socks to enter my bathroom," Cohen reports.

With this winter's natural gas and heating oil prices at record highs, you may be wondering how to keep warm without emptying your bank account. But you can put away the fleece pajamas: there are recent options—and some interesting new developments—that you can warm up to.

The biggest changes today aren't in heat sources, but in the way heat is distributed throughout the home. One option is to upgrade to a hydro-air system by replacing your furnace with a boiler and adding a heat exchanger and air handlers. With a

hydro-air system, heat is created by running hot 180°F water through a series of pipes located in front of a fan that then blows the warm air through your existing ductwork.

Hydro-air systems are extremely popular in new construction. In older homes, a good way to update the heating system (and add central air conditioning at the same time) is by installing a high-velocity hydro-air system with very small ducts. "When retrofitting a home using hydro-air, one of the benefits includes the removal of unsightly radiators and all exposed heating pipes, and then the installation of a mini-duct system that will easily fit behind walls and above ceilings," says Ron Capossela of Royal Palm Heating and Cooling in Brewster.

The price to install a hydro-air system is \$5 to \$10 per square foot, with installation in a 5,000-square-foot home costing an estimated \$35,000. To add the hydro-air onto an existing forced-air system runs \$12,000 to \$14,000 for the same size house.

Another option? Kickspace heaters which, unlike hulking radiators or awkward baseboards that prohibit the placement of furniture or cabinetry tight up against exterior walls, are designed to fit inconspicuously under cabinets or in the floor. "They're great space-saving alternatives," says Eric Messer, owner of Sunrise Building & Remodeling in



Warming Trends

Briarcliff Manor—and ideal for hard-to-heat spots such as kitchens and bathrooms. Kickspace heaters cost approximately \$400 to \$600 apiece (you'll need two for an average kitchen), including installation fees.

One of the most popular new options available today—as the Cohens discovered—is radiant heat. According to John Fantauzzi, technical director of the Radiant Panel Association, in 2004 there was a 37 percent increase in hydronic radiant tubing sales from the previous year, and demand is continuing to increase dramatically.

A radiant heating system works by circulating warm water (90°F to 140°F) heated by a boiler through tubing laid out in a pattern underneath the floor. Heat is radiated upward, warming the objects and people in the room rather than the air. Depending on whether you want to set the radiant heat under an existing floor or are planning to add new flooring when remodeling or expanding, there are many different installation options. One of the latest innovations involves installing plywood subfloors with pre-cut grooves for tubing and aluminum heat diffuser plates to distribute the heat.

Homeowners are keen on radiant heating systems because they're invisible, as well as very comfortable and healthy. (There are no ducts to clean or air currents to blow dust around.) Another major benefit: it's easy to zone the system using multiple thermostats, so your den might be set at a toasty 72°F, while an unused guest room could be set at 55°F.

Peter Gasperini, president of Northeast Radiant in Pleasantville, says some homeowners opt for bells and whistles, including a snow-and-ice-melt system that has sensors to keep your driveway and walks clear during inclement weather. Another nice perk: a radiant towel warmer to keep linens warm for when you step out of the shower.

Radiant heat starts at \$15 per square foot, with an installation for a 5,000-square-foot home costing about \$75,000. While this may seem an expensive system to install, Gasperini notes, "you can expect to save 20 to 30 percent annually on heating costs."

Of course, you can always choose to


Where Heat's Headed

So what can we expect in home heating five or 10 years from now?

Bill Zoeller, senior architect at Steven Winter Associates, a Norwalk-based consulting firm that works to improve the building environment through research, design, and technology, believes we might be moving toward geothermal heating powered by solar electric panels. A geothermal heating system, applauded because it's clean and sustainable, operates by drawing the earth's thermal energy and transferring it to air circulated through the interior ductwork of a home.

Developer Bill Balter of Wilder Balter Partners in Elmsford is already hot on that trail, having built a 3,600-square-foot home in Yorktown Heights with a geothermal heat pump. According to Balter, the geothermal system cost \$33,000, while an oil-fired hydro-air system would have run \$25,000. But the owners will reap the benefits, pocketing an estimated \$1,200 a year in combined heating and air-conditioning savings.

But, experts report, geothermal heating hasn't caught on with builders and homeowners—yet. "If efficiencies go up and costs go down, and if conventional fuel prices continue to rise, then it's a possibility," Zoeller says. "We're not quite there yet."

use a combination of heating options. "The best heating systems combine multiple applications," says Messer. "For instance, once you have a boiler for hot water and you've decided to do hydro-air throughout your house, it's easy to step up and do radiant heat in a bathroom, kitchen, or basement." 

Laura Joseph Mogil is a freelance writer residing in Briarcliff Manor. After researching this article about heating options, she rues the day she and her husband bought a home with forced hot air. She is now looking into the possibility of installing radiant heat to warm up her marble bathroom floor.