

Consider central air conditioning before heat arrives

By Tara Marion

If you're thinking about adding central air conditioning to your home, you must first determine whether you have the proper furnace setup and enough supply openings to disperse air throughout your house.

Houses with hot-water heat, for instance, can be difficult because they lack blowers to blow the air through the duct system.

"It's like putting in a whole new heating system, because you need a furnace with a blower or an air handler with a blower," said Tom Meyers, owner of Meyers Heating & Air Conditioning Service, 4840 Portage Road.

Unlike hot-water heaters, forced-air furnaces already have a blower or air handler. In addition to purchasing a central air conditioning unit, a homeowner with hot-water heat will likely need to buy a forced-air furnace setup for cooling and possibly additional duct work.

These homes often lack the essential duct work, which is expensive to install. Steve Rogers, owner of Rogers Refrigeration Inc. in Richland, explained two options for duct work.

"There are some situations where they don't need to add duct work; we have what's called a split system that we could use," Rogers explained. "But, depending on the house, we may have to add a whole new duct system for this type of application."

Meyers said installing central air is easiest on ranch-styles houses. Ranches are easier than tri-levels because the main living area is all on one floor.

"Tri-levels are harder to cool because of the multiple areas; cold air drops and hot air rises," he said.

Houses with forced-air heat are also easy for adding central air because they already have the registers in the floors to support the air conditioning.

"Those houses are the easy ones because the duct work and everything is there for moving the cold air," Rogers said.

Once heating contractors determine whether your home is equipped to handle central air, they must decide which air conditioning unit has the cooling capacity, or size, to cool your home.

Roughly, on average, it's 700 square feet per ton," Meyers said.

Factors like age of the house, which direction it faces, whether it's shaded or sunny, the style and number of windows, the type of construction and even the roof color affect the sizing of air conditioning units.

Rogers said now is a good time to start thinking about central air for the summer because manufacturers tend to raise the price of air conditioning units in the spring.

When shopping for air conditioning, "The best price is not always the best job," Rogers pointed out, suggesting that customers look at the price of the unit as well as the warranty.

Once you've had central air installed in your home, Rogers and Meyers explained how to keep your home cool without overwhelming your system.

Rogers once had a customer who wanted to open the windows at night to let the cool air in, then close up the house in the daytime and run the air conditioner. "My suggestion is that you set it and forget it," Rogers said.

Open windows allow humidity to enter your house, which Meyers and Rogers agreed is more difficult to remove than heat.

"Humidity is harder to remove than the temperature, so it takes more energy," Rogers said.

Meyers explained how lengthy the cooling process actually is and said it takes half an hour to raise the temperature of a house by 10 degrees, whereas it takes up to eight hours to lower the temperature by the same amount.

"If it worked faster than that, it would not dehumidify," he said.

In the long run, Rogers said running the air conditioning all the time is the most efficient way to cool your home.

This is because it's less expensive to keep the house dried out than to have the doors and windows open one day and closed the next. "Then the poor thing's running with its tongue hanging out," Rogers said.