

End winter, welcome spring with furnace maintenance

By Tara Marion

There is an easy way to beat that rush of fall service calls when everybody turns on their furnace and many of them fail. David Lambright, owner of Bel-Aire Heating & Air Conditioning, 8324 Shaver Road, suggested thinking about preventive maintenance in the spring and avoiding what he called a “heat-out problem” in the fall.

If your furnace didn’t require any service during last year’s heating season, having it maintained now will prepare it for fall when you start it up again.

“Your furnace is just a piece of mechanical equipment; it doesn’t know what time of year it is, so anytime is a good time to service it,” said Luke Vanderhill, vice president and owner of Nieboer Heating & Cooling Inc. 2107 Schippers Lane.

From a heating contractor’s point of view, however, spring is the best time for annual furnace maintenance. Lambright said, “We just get deluged with calls in the fall for maintenance, so if you wait until then, it may take a month or two to get the service. It’s generally better to get it done in the late part of the winter or early spring.”

According to Lambright, “There are literally hundreds of different furnaces and different ways to maintain them,” which makes it difficult to pinpoint what annual furnace maintenance actually is. However, a number of general safety checks, regardless of furnace type, should be checked over regularly.

Furnace maintenance has undergone many changes over the past 15 years, partly because of the variations among furnaces. They went from a standing pilot, which meant having a lit pilot on the furnace at all times, to an intermittent ignition system.

“With this change, obviously there is a decrease in the need to have your pilot cleaned and checked all the time,” Lambright said.

Heating contractors review a number of things during a routine maintenance check: gas pressure, electrical and equipment, safeties, burners and the blower motor.

“We have to make sure the blower motor is not running overloaded or running improperly, which is costing you money” Vanderhill said, “so we check the average draw on those motors.” The thermostat is also checked to see how close its running to set point.

“Now, more than anything, what you’re trying to do is increase the efficiency and reliability of a unit with your maintenance,” Lambright said.

Although you don’t run your furnace during the summer, Vanderhill explained how running the blower can circulate the air in your house, which is another reason why spring is an ideal time for annual maintenance.

“If you have a filtering system on the furnace or a high-efficiency air cleaner, you can benefit from running the blower all the time, because you’re keeping the air cleaner,” he said.

Running the blower can also even out the air temperature in your house by spreading it around, which might save you money on your gas or electric bill, although you still have to pay to run the blower. “It’s kind of a wash; there are both sides to the coin on that issue,” Vanderhill explained.

If you are thinking about adding central air conditioning to your home this summer, spring maintenance can help determine whether putting it on your current furnace is a good idea.

“There may be problems there and you should be looking at it from the standpoint of repairing or replacing the furnace,” Vanderhill explained.