

HOME & GARDEN

Tips for choosing a reputable contractor (440 words)

(NC)—With colder months just around the corner, you should have your furnace inspected and cleaned by a qualified service technician. This technician can also provide useful tips on shutting down your central air conditioner for the season.

More often than not, homeowners do not distinguish one contractor from another on anything but price. Due to safety concerns, as well as the increased costs of heating or cooling a home without the proper equipment, the lowest price is not always the best value.

To maximize your comfort, safety and peace of mind, and to minimize your operating costs down the road, be sure to deal only with qualified, professional contractors.

So how can you be sure a contractor is reputable and qualified?

There are some obvious red flags to look for when shopping for a contractor. Reputable contractors, for example:

- will not quote prices over the phone without first assessing your job on-site;
- will not request large cash advances prior to the delivery of any equipment or materials;
- will readily provide a full business address as well as a telephone number where the company can be reached;
- will be happy to offer the names and addresses of customers they have done work for in your area.

The Heating, Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Institute of Canada (HRAI) requires its contractor members to carry relevant trade, fuel safety and

applicable licenses as well as worker's compensation and liability insurance. You may be surprised to learn that many contractors simply don't bother with licensing or insurance. They may pass on their lower costs to you up front, but you may end up paying much more over time, not only financially, but in terms of your family's comfort, health, safety and peace of mind.

Your own due diligence is important to locating a reputable contractor. Prior to calling for a quote, research the contractors in your area by:

- using the contractor locator on www.hrai.ca for a listing of local HRAI member company contractors (or call HRAI's call centre at 1-877-467-4724);
- visiting each contractor's website for a review of their services and the equipment they offer;
- making sure the contractors you deal with are properly licensed and insured to do the work that they do;
- contacting the Better Business Bureau, which maintains records of consumer complaints about its members;
- speaking with the contractor's previous clients.

A contractor's membership in HRAI does not guarantee a quality installation or service, but it will provide you with some assurance that they are properly qualified and insured to do the job right.

More information is available online at www.hrai.ca.

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Have your furnace inspected prior to the start of the heating season

(307 words)

(NC)—The old adage "if it isn't broken, don't fix it" does not apply when it comes to your household heating system. Like a car, your furnace is a running machine that needs regular tune-ups to ensure its efficiency and longevity. You wouldn't wait more than a year to give your car an oil change, so don't wait until your furnace breaks down to call for service.

A clean, well-adjusted heating system will save you money on fuel and will prolong furnace life. The cost of annual servicing is modest, especially when compared with the price of a new furnace.

There is some maintenance that homeowners can undertake themselves, such as the cleaning and replacing of filters. To ensure safe and efficient operation of a heating system, however, homeowners should have their furnace inspected and cleaned annually by a qualified service technician.

Homeowners searching for a qualified heating contractor in their area can access a user-friendly website, www.hrai.ca or call toll-free at 1-877-467-HRAI.

The website lists contractor members of the Heating, Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Institute of Canada (HRAI), a national trade association.

Inspections performed by a licensed technician should include the following:

- A safety test for carbon monoxide (CO)
- Checking for hazardous debris in the chimney and flue
- Cleaning of air filters and re-installing
- Checking operation of thermostat and safety controls
- Checking gas pilot safety system and cleaning as required
- Cleaning the motor and fan
- Checking the blower operation
- Checking condition, tension and alignment of fan belt, and performing required adjustments (on older systems)
- Cleaning burners and setting for proper combustion and ignition
- Checking the gas piping to furnace.

Investing in the proper maintenance of a home heating system is essential for ensuring that it provides reliable and efficient indoor comfort when the outdoor temperature drops.

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Homecare Tips:

Making the switch from cooling to heating

(281 words)

(NC)—There are a few simple things you should do when you shut down your central air conditioning system for the season:

- Switch the thermostat setting from "cool" to "off" or "heat". Check the temperature settings for heat if using a programmable thermostat and reprogram if necessary.
- Shut the power off at the air conditioning breaker or remove the fuse from the electrical panel.
- Once the power is off, gently rinse down the outdoor unit using a garden hose.
- It is not necessary to cover the unit. In some cases this may actually lead to corrosion and create a comfortable living space for small animals which can lead to repairs. If you decide to cover your unit, make sure that it is well vented and follow the manufacturers instructions carefully.
- Registers that have been closed off or dampered on basement and main floor levels for summer operation should be opened for heating operation.

- Check furnace filters and replace if dirty.

Prior to starting up your furnace in the fall you should have your furnace inspected and cleaned by a qualified service technician to ensure safe and efficient operation.

Similarly, when spring arrives, be sure to have your central air conditioning systems inspected and cleaned by a qualified contractor.

Homeowners searching for a qualified heating or cooling contractor in their area can access a user-friendly website: www.hrai.ca or call toll-free at 1-877-467-HRAI.

The website lists contractor members of the Heating, Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Institute of Canada (HRAI), a national trade association that ensures its members hold the up-to-date business and trade licences, qualifications and insurance coverage that any consumer should expect of their contractor.

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