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(StatePoint) Savvy homeowners know that with cool weather, comes a bit of preparation. A quick audit of your heating equipment can mean less wasted energy, a more comfortable home and lower energy bills.

Nearly half of all heating and cooling equipment in U.S. homes never performs to its advertised capacity and efficiency due to incorrect installation, according to U.S. government estimates. And if you have an older system that was built before current efficiency standards, you could be spending more than needed on heating your home.

If it's time to replace your system, be sure to have it properly installed by an HVACR professional, certified by North American Technician Excellence (NATE), the nation's largest nonprofit certification body for HVACR technicians. NATE-certified technicians are skilled professionals who have proven their knowledge in the HVACR industry by passing specialized certification tests.

"The NATE-certified techs who perform maintenance and repairs do a consistently great job. We never have any concerns if the job is done right," says Rob Kirkpatrick, a longstanding customer of Thermal Services, a Nebraska-based contractor.

Beyond having an efficient heating system properly installed, you can prepare for the season in the following ways:

- Clean heating filters. Check them every couple of weeks and change them at least twice in the season, or as directed by the manufacturer.
- Check and maintain insulation.

Is your heating system ready for cool weather?



Improperly insulated walls, floors, attics, basements and crawlspaces drain away heat and can also lead to moisture imbalance. Adding weather stripping and caulk around windows and doors can also improve a home's insulation.

- Turn down the thermostat or install a programmable thermostat to regulate temperature.
- Clean the furnace area. Don't keep chemicals or cleaning products near a heater, and don't store anything next to it that could impede ventilation.

Free all vents and returns of obstructions. Don't lay carpet over vents, place furniture over or in front of them, or obstruct the flow of air.

Dry air feels cooler than moist air, so install a humidifier. A simple humidifier may make the home feel five degrees warmer than a home with dry air.

- Look into geothermal heating systems which use earth's natural heat and are among the most efficient and energy-conserving heating and cooling technologies currently available.
- For optimal performance

of your HVAC system, get an annual service contract which includes both heating and cooling maintenance. But take care to avoid poor service and scams. To find a qualified local contractor who employs certified HVACR professionals, look for the NATE logo or go to www.natex.org.

By incorporating a few energy-friendly habits into your routine and by making sure your heating system is operating optimally, this season, you can keep utility bills low while maintaining a cozy, comfortable home.

Design a more functional pantry

Many homeowners wish they had more storage space, and kitchens are one area where people seemingly can always use more storage.

Despite a desire for more kitchen space, until recently, kitchen pantries fell out of favor. Builders and architects may have thought that close proximity to supermarkets as well as multi-use cabinets in kitchens would offset the need for pantries. But according to a recent survey from the National Association of Home Builders, a kitchen pantry is the most desirable kitchen feature for buyers in the market for a new home.

According to a 2016 survey from ReportLinker, 98 percent of Americans say cooking at home is their preferred way to prepare a meal. And despite the wide array of



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restaurants, prepared meals and fast food options nearby, more than one-third of people cook at home daily, with nearly 50 percent cooking between three and six days a week.

In order to accommodate for spending more time in the kitchen, homeowners are directing additional attention to kitchen preparation and storage features. In fact, one recent trend in kitchen renovations is creating custom-designed pantries.

Locate the appropriate space - Ideally, pantries should be in or adjacent to the kitchen. But not every home layout allows for this

setup. Some homeowners need to move storage pantries into the garage, the basement or a mud/laundry room.

Various factors should be considered before placing a pantry outside a kitchen. What is the climate? Will food spoil? Is there a possibility that vermin or insects can infiltrate the room and access food? These factors will dictate whether to have closed cabinets, air-tight bins or open shelves or if other modifications must be made to the room prior to building.

Choose the type of pantry - Accessibility is essential in a pantry. Everything should be easily reached and grabbed as needed without having to move too many things. Ideally, foods should be arranged in a single layer so that all items can be viewed at a glance. Shelves of various depths and heights can accommodate items of different sizes. Adjustable shelves are ideal because they can be modified as foods change. Sliding drawers can improve reach in cabinets.

In smaller spaces, French door-style reach-in cabinets are convenient and flexible. In complete kitchen remodels or new constructions, walk-in pantries offer the most space and flexibility.

Must-have features - Pantries serve different functions in different homes. For the bulk shopper, a pantry with plenty of room for large items will be needed.

Lighting can be beneficial in all pantries. Lights can improve visibility when trying to locate items. Others prefer an outlet for charging handheld vacuums or other small appliances. Counter space in the pantry enables homeowners to unload groceries directly onto pantry shelves.

For pantries located outside of the kitchen, built-in freezers can maximize storage possibilities, especially for those who freeze-and-eat after bulk shopping ventures.

Pantries are popular features that homeowners can customize depending on their storage needs and the amount of time they spend in their kitchens. FH188185



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