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The New/Old Oil-Heated Home Can Be Both Green and Cozy

By Ellen Galvin

My dream home appeared in the form of a beautifully restored 1923 Craftsman Bungalow in Northeast Portland. The modern upgrades in the kitchen and bathrooms were a bonus, but it was the wide eaves, the square column porch, the built-in cabinetry, and the leaded glass windows that drew me in and sealed the deal.

To my own surprise, I was equally enamored with the cold air return vents. Made of intersecting solid oak slats to form a grid of rectangular openings, these "eggcrate-style" grilles are common in older homes with forced air heat. I was reassured by my realtor, however, that although the wooden vents were vintage, the house's heating system had been "upgraded" from heating oil to natural gas.

Given that it was late summer, I didn't give the issue of heat much thought — that is, until the chilly rains of October rolled in. Suddenly, I was nostalgic for the warm and cozy feeling of my childhood home in upstate New York, which was heated with oil. I remember coming home from school on cold, snowy afternoons and turning up the heat to thaw in a warm house in a matter of minutes. In contrast, my Portland home never seemed to get warm — or stay warm — in the same manner.

Was it a simple case of childhood nostalgia? Not according to Molly Brady, president of First Call Heating & Cooling. As a member of the Board of the Oregon Petroleum Association, she worked closely with local heating oil dealers to develop OregonOilheat.com, a website created in 2005 to educate consumers about oil heat. "Natural gas is simply not as warm," explains Brady. "Oil burns 400° hotter than natural gas with no soot or odor. The house heats up faster and you use less fuel to feel warmer."

Brady spends much of her time clarifying common misconceptions about oil heat, even though more than 10 million homes nationwide are warmed with this fuel source. In fact, many of Portland's vintage and historic homes still use oil heat. For some new homeowners, it may be the first time they've encountered an oil-heated home.

"If you fall in love with a home that is heated with oil, do some research before making a decision

to convert from oil to another fuel source," advises Brady, who says that conversion from oil to gas is very expensive. She points to a study by the Consumer Energy Council of America, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the best interest of consumers, which concluded that it is financially unwise for consumers to convert from oil to gas heat.

Like most Portlanders, I am concerned about the environmental impact of oil heat. Brady, who is a Certified Master Recycler, reassures me that new heating oil systems are equally efficient as new gas systems (and points out that old systems of either type are inefficient and should ideally be replaced). Moreover, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) cites modern oil burners as one of the cleanest combustion sources available, releasing near-zero levels of smoke and producing less greenhouse gas than natural gas systems.

"Because of their high efficiency and cleanliness, modern oil heat systems have an amazingly small impact on the environment," adds Brady. "Best of all, they are fully compatible with biodiesel. No modifications need to be made to existing oil heat equipment."

Lastly, what about underground storage tanks? I know that older tanks can be problematic, and in the case of my own home, my mortgage lender requested a soil sample before I could complete the purchase of my home (fortunately, there was no contamination).

"One of the most widespread misconceptions about underground tanks is that they are a financially devastating accident waiting to happen," explains Brady. "This is simply untrue. Even if there is a problem, the cost of clean up in Oregon is relatively low and is usually covered by your oil dealer's tank service contract."

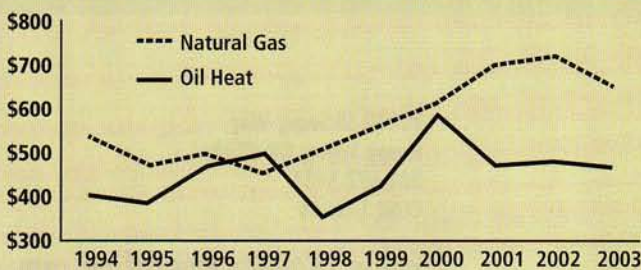
Brady goes on to describe new above-ground tanks, which are available in a variety of shapes and sizes designed to tuck away into the corner of a garage, basement, or backyard. In addition, new below-ground tanks are made with very strong corrosion-resistant materials and can be installed at a fraction of the cost of converting to natural gas.

Finally, heating oil is one of the safest fuels available, with a low risk for carbon monoxide poisoning and without the explosive quality of natural gas. "You can actually drop a lit match in a bucket of heating oil and nothing will happen," says Brady.

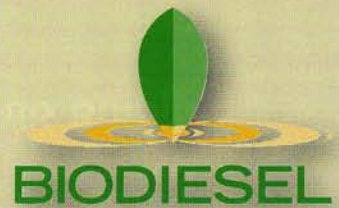
Given the choice — and the information — I would have opted for the coziness of an oil heated home using a biodiesel blend.

For more information visit OregonOilheat.com or contact the Oregon Oil Heat Help Desk at 503-546-5501 between 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. ■

Average Annual Cost to Heat a Home (1994-2003)



Based on BTU's necessary to heat the average home



Biodiesel: The New American Heating Oil

Home heating oil has long been a responsible environmental choice with very low emissions and an overall cleanliness approaching 99.9%. Now a new twist on the home heating oil you love is making it even better. Biodiesel heating oil is a well-tested and renewable fuel made from vegetable oils like soy and canola grown right here in America. When biodiesel is used for heating, it is mixed with regular heating oil to produce a new energy source with even lower emissions. Different blends of biodiesel heating oil are available in Oregon. B20 is 20% soy or canola oil mixed with 80% regular heating oil. B5 contains 5% soy or canola oil.

The next time you fill your heating oil tank, why not choose the American fuel? No modifications are required to your present heating system to start using biodiesel, and it is every bit as warm as the heating oil you use now.

Why Use Biodiesel?

- You are supporting an American grown and produced fuel
- You are using a natural, renewable resource
- You are helping the environment
- You are supporting family farms and businesses
- You are helping to reduce petroleum-based fuel consumption