Tired of High Utility Bills?

Are you looking for ways to reduce your monthly utility bills? Let this free energy saving workshop show you how. The workshop will show homeowners where they can make changes in and around their homes to reduce their energy consumption. The low-cost or no-cost methods will be easy for any participant to do, save money and be more comfortable during the cold weather. The workshop will be offered at 5:30 pm on Tuesday, January 23 at the Buncombe County Cooperative Extension Center, 94 Coxe Avenue, Asheville. Although the workshop is free, space is limited so pre-registration is necessary by calling 828-255-5522.

Parenting Matters: Parent Education Program

It’s not easy being a parent. In fact parenting is probably the most challenging job most of us will ever have. Come to this eight week, hands-on creative learning program for parents who want to make a difference in their child's life and improve their parent-child relationship. You will learn how to manage stress, improve your communication skills, avoid power struggles with your child, and build a support system to help you. The series will meet on Tuesdays, January 23 & 30, February 6, 20, & 27, March 6, 20, & 27. The time is 5:30-7:30 pm at the West Asheville Library Community Room on Haywood Road. Pre-registration is required with a fee of $15 for the series.

Basic Home Maintenance Course

If you are either a new homeowner or a long timer, this course could be for you. The Buncombe County Center of North Carolina Cooperative Extension is offering a five-session Basic Home Maintenance Course beginning Tuesday, February 6. The two-hour class will be held from 5:30-7:30 pm on February 6, 8, 13, 15 & 20 (snow date February 27) at the Extension Center, 94 Coxe Avenue, Asheville. Some of the topics to be covered are: saving on your heating and cooling bills, basic plumbing repairs, interior and exterior maintenance, landscaping and lawn care, indoor air quality, common household pests, etc. The course also offers “hands-on” repairs which include: faucets, drywall, and screens. The fee of $20 includes all materials. Pre-registration is required by calling 828-255-5522.
Healthy Crock-Pot Cooking

With the hustle and bustle of the holidays over, the short winter days have set in. Many of us feel the crunch when we are trying to prepare dinner. The decrease in sunlight and the cold weather force us to come up with wintertime meals that heat us up without taking a lot of time. Get the crock-pot out and try making some hearty soups, stews, chili and tomato sauces. The planning ahead saves time later when you get in the door and want to have dinner on the table quickly. It is also a great way to eat the variety of healthy vegetables that are on our New Year's Resolution lists.

Crock-pots or slow cookers work by cooking foods slowly at a low temperature, generally between 170°F to 280°F. The direct heat from the pot, lengthy cooking and steam created within the covered container combine to destroy bacteria and make the crock-pot a safe process for many of our favorite wintertime dishes. There are some tips you want to keep in mind to make sure you cook up a safe, healthy meal.

- Begin with a clean cooker, work area and utensils.
- Cut foods into chunks or small pieces in order to make sure they cook thoroughly.
- Do not cook large pieces of food like roasts or whole chickens because these are too big and will stay in the temperature “danger zone” too long and you risk foodborne illness.
- Fill the crock-pot no less than ½ full and no more than 2/3 full.
- Put vegetables in first, because they cook slower than meats and poultry. Add the defrosted meat and cover the food with liquids such as broth, water, tomato or barbecue sauce.
- Do not lift the lid often. Each time it is lifted add 20 minutes to the cooking time.
- It is best to cook the food on HIGH for the first hour and then decrease to the LOW setting for the rest of the time. Some newer models have an auto setting which will do this for you.
- Do not reheat leftovers in the crock-pot, but you can keep them warm for serving if you first heat them on the stove or microwave.

To see if your crock-pot is working correctly, fill the pot two-thirds full with water. Cover and put it on HIGH. Check the temperature of the water with a food thermometer in two hours. If it is 160° or higher, then your pot is working correctly and you are set to go. For more information or healthy crock-pot recipes call our office.

Planning Ahead for Bad Weather

There is usually one storm during the winter months that catches many people unprepared. You need to remember that the heavy snowfall or ice that may accompany it can cause the loss of electricity, heat, and telephone service. If it is a severe storm, it could trap you in your home for a few days. To beat the last minute preparation rush and have your home/family ready, the following are supplies to have available.

- Flashlight and extra batteries. Battery-powered NOAA weather radio and portable radio to receive emergency information. These may be your only links to outside communication.
- Extra food and bottled water. High energy food, such as dried fruit or candy, and canned food requiring no cooking or refrigeration is best. Manual can opener.
- Extra medicine, baby items and pet supplies.
- First-aid supplies.
- Heating fuel in case the fuel supplier cannot reach you after a severe storm. Back-up heating source, such as a fireplace, woodstove, space heater, etc.
- Fire extinguisher, carbon monoxide detector, and smoke detector.
Start Family Meetings Anytime

Family meetings are a great way to keep in touch during our busy lives. You can start a family meeting with any aged children. You don’t have to wait until they can read and write. Besides the improved family communication that occurs when we touch base regularly, your children also benefit from learning how to share their ideas and concerns in a respectful way. It can give them the self-confidence when they need to speak up at school and with future employment. It is important to remember a few things about these meetings. Make sure that they are a time to share positive contributions like the best part of their week as well as any conflicts and stress that you are going through. This is also a good time to go over the schedules for the week to make sure everyone knows what everyone else is doing. When you decide to initiate the family meeting, the parents need to discuss first how they want the meetings to take place. The parents need to be on the same page about the objectives and how they will respond to the children’s input. Then begin with setting some ground rules for the meeting. Include the children in setting these rules. Be sure to guide these rules to include being respectful and determine what respect means to your family. The clearer the rules, the more effective the meetings will be. So make this New Year a new beginning for your family and start family meetings on a regular basis.

Radon – The Silent Killer

Since radon has not been in the headlines recently, it is often out-of-sight out-of-mind to many homeowners until it comes time to sell their home. But the health risks related to living in a home with elevated radon levels are still a concern. Although radon is found in the air outdoors it becomes a health issue when harmful levels are trapped in buildings. The United States Environmental Protection Agency estimates that radon is responsible for more than 20,000 lung cancer deaths per year. Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States after smoking and the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers. Since radon does not have an odor and is invisible, people tend to downplay the health effects and ignore the possibility that there might be a silent killer within the walls of their home.

The only way to know if your home has elevated levels is to test. You cannot rely on the radon results of a neighbor’s house or that of the house down the block. The levels found in the home are determined by the location of the source to the home and the home's construction. The US EPA has designated Buncombe County as a Zone 1 county which means elevated levels of radon have been found in some homes.

Testing homes for elevated levels of radon is simple and inexpensive. Radon test kits can be purchased at local hardware stores and home improvement stores, directly from radon testing companies or are available free from the Buncombe County Cooperative Extension on a first come basis. Once your home has been tested and if the results are below the action level of 4 pCi/L (picocuries per liter), you will not have to test again unless changes are made to the home. In our area we tend to have the more elevated levels during the winter months so January is a good time to test. Should your home be found to have elevated levels of radon the problem can be fixed by qualified contractors for a cost similar to that of many other home repairs. In our area the cost can be from $800 to $2500 depending on the home.

Cold and Flu Season

With family members getting ill from the cold or flu, it is all the more reason to keep the house disinfected. Since product labeling can sometimes be confusing an explanation between a disinfectant and a disinfectant cleaner or antibacterial cleaner may be necessary. Disinfectants contain antimicrobial ingredients that kill germs if surfaces are free from heavy soil. Disinfectant or antibacterial cleaners contain cleaners contain ingredients for removing soil, as well as antimicrobial ingredients that kill germs. Household bleach disinfects when used according to label directions.
The Solution to Your New Year's Resolution

If your New Year's Resolution was to become debt free or if the after holiday credit card bills are arriving and the shock of last months spending is taking its toll on your stress level, Extension can help. We have available a computer program that provides a debt reduction plan that is easy to use, easy to understand, easy to do, and easy to follow. It shows you the fastest way to pay off debt by: showing you who to pay each month until your debts are paid off, making PowerPayments using money from paid off debts, cutting the amount of interest you pay back, adding a little extra to what you usually pay, or paying a lump sum of extra money like your tax return or a bonus. Extension will offer free, private one-on-one appointments with individuals during January to assist with the computer program. For more info contact the Extension Center at 828-255-5522.

Water, Water Everywhere

We all hear that we need water to stay healthy. We need to get 8 glasses a day. But sometimes we wonder--do we really need all those glasses? Sixty percent of our weight is from water. Every system in our body needs water to function. As we lose water through breathing, perspiration, urine, and bowel movements we need to replenish that water through beverages and foods. If we don’t, we can end up dehydrated, and this dehydration leads to poor body functioning and even death. To avoid dehydration, the average person needs to drink enough fluids so that we aren’t thirsty and can produce between one and two liters of colorless or slightly yellow urine a day. To make it easier on us, the guideline of 8 glasses of water a day will usually keep us hydrated to this point. But you may need a little more or be alright with a little less as our water usage varies as well. We also will get some of our water through foods, such as fruits and vegetables. So, that is another reason to eat your 5 to 9 a day.