FREE CHAPTER

DONNA FIXES

Donna's Home Book

Sixty Ways to a Smaller Bill, and a House That's Easier After 60

Heat, electric, hot water and water: what really moves the number. Then the house itself, room by room: more space, fewer falls, less bending and lifting, and a home that works when you live on your own



by Donna Kowalski

FREE CHAPTER · LARGE PRINT · 20 CHAPTERS · ONE BOOK

CHAPTER TWO

Windows and Doors

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Stopping drafts with things that cost a few dollars and peel off in spring

We had a corner unit on the third floor that never got warm. Two radiators, both hot enough to fry an egg, and the lady who lived there wore her coat to watch television. Three different men from the crew went up and fiddled with the radiators. Then Walt sent me.

I didn't touch the radiators. I wet my hand and went around the windows. The north one had a gap along the meeting rail, where the top sash and the bottom sash come together, that I could feel from a foot away. A few cents' worth of rope caulk, and she took her coat off.

That was the day I stopped looking at the heat first.

Everything in this chapter is small and cheap, and almost all of it can be undone in spring. Take the list from your draft walk and work down it, worst draft first. (The draft walk is Chapter 1 of the book: ten minutes with a damp hand.)

BEFORE YOU SEAL A WINDOW

In every bedroom, and in any room you might have to get out of in a fire, leave at least one window that opens easily. Don't rope-caulk it, don't film it. Seal the others.

6. Press rope caulk into the gaps

What you'll notice: a thin cold stream of air along the edges of a window, or where the two sashes meet in the middle.

Rope caulk is a soft grey putty that comes in a coil. No gun, no tools. It stays soft all winter and peels away in spring.

1. Wipe the frame dry. It won't stick to a wet or dusty surface.
2. Press a strand into the gap with your thumb, all the way along.
3. Do the meeting rail in the middle too. That's the leak everybody forgets.

A box costs a few dollars and does several windows. Use it only on windows you won't open until April.

7. Weatherstrip the door you use most

What you'll notice: daylight around the edges of a closed door, or a door that rattles in its frame when the wind blows.

If you can see light, heat is leaving through it. The fix is a strip of soft material around the frame for the door to squeeze shut against.

1. Start with the stick-on foam kind. It has a peel-off backing and cuts with scissors.
2. Wash the frame where the strip will go and let it dry completely.
3. Stick it along the top and both sides, on the surface the door closes against.
4. Close the door. It should feel snug and still latch without a shove. If you have to lean on it, the foam is too thick.

A few dollars a door. Foam flattens in a year or two and wants replacing. Longer-lasting vinyl or metal strips are tacked or screwed on: a nice small job for a handy relative.

8. Put a sweep on the bottom of the door

What you'll notice: cold ankles near the front or back door.

The gap under a door is often the biggest hole in the house, and it's at floor level where your feet live.

- **A slide-on sweep** is a U-shaped strip that pushes onto the bottom of the door from the side. No screws. Measure the door's width and thickness before you shop.
- **A screw-on sweep** fastens to the inside face of the door with a few small screws. If a screwdriver bothers your hands, ask somebody.
- **A draft snake,** or a rolled bath towel, laid against the door works for nothing. But you have to put it back every time you come in, and it mustn't be left where you'll trip on it.

Under ten dollars for most. The door should still open and close without dragging.

9. Put up a plastic film window kit

What you'll notice: a window that's cold to stand beside though you can't find one particular draft. Usually an old single-pane window, or one whose storm is long gone.

A film kit is a sheet of clear plastic you tape to the inside of the window frame and shrink tight with a hair dryer. It stops the leaks around the whole window at once and traps a layer of still air against the glass. Of

the cheap window fixes, it's the one I've seen make the plainest difference.

1. Clean the frame and let it dry.
2. Run the kit's double-sided tape around the frame.
3. Press the plastic onto the tape, starting at the top. Wrinkles don't matter yet.
4. Warm it with a hair dryer, kept moving and a few inches away, until the wrinkles pull flat. Trim the extra.

A kit for several windows costs about the price of a pizza, and it comes off in spring. The tape can lift old paint, so if you rent, ask first. If the top of the window is beyond your reach from a two-step stool, hand the job, and the hair dryer, to a helper.

10. Use your curtains like a second window

What you'll notice: a chill rolling off the glass in the evening, even with the window sealed.

Glass is a poor blanket. A heavy curtain is a better one, if you work it right.

- **Sunny side, daytime: open.** Winter sun through a south window is free heat. Let it in.
- **Every window, at dusk: closed.** The minute the sun goes, the glass starts stealing. Draw the curtains before you turn on the lamps.
- **Heavier is better.** A lined curtain that reaches the sill or the floor does more than a thin one. You don't need new ones: a blanket clipped to the rod on the coldest nights does the job.

Free if you already have curtains.

CURTAINS AND HEAT DON'T MIX

Keep curtains from hanging over a radiator or a baseboard heater. They send the heat straight up the cold glass instead of into the room. Getting all of that heat into the rooms where you sit is Chapter 3 of the book. And keep them at least three feet from any space heater.

11. Close your storm windows, all the way, and lock the sash

What you'll notice: you have storm windows and the room is drafty anyway.

Go and look at them. In my experience a good many storm windows are sitting open an inch from last summer, or the glass is still up and the screen is down.

1. Slide each storm's glass panel all the way down until it seats.
2. Close the inside window and turn the lock. The lock isn't only for burglars: it pulls the two sashes tight together.
3. Find the small notches or holes along the bottom of the storm frame. Those are weep holes, and they let rain and condensation drain out. Never caulk them.

Free. If a panel is stuck, don't fight it. Ask somebody with younger shoulders.

12. Deal with the mail slot

What you'll notice: a flap that rattles in the wind and a cold patch of floor inside the front door.

A mail slot is a hole in your door with a loose lid. A cover with a brush or a second flap screws onto the inside for a few dollars. If you have a mailbox outside and never use the slot, stuff it with foam for the winter, tape over the inside, and tell your mail carrier.

13. Find out about the attic hatch

What you'll notice: a cool draft on your head in the upstairs hall, or dark dust streaks around a ceiling hatch.

Warm air rises, and an attic hatch is often just a loose board lying in a hole in the ceiling. The fix is foam weatherstripping around the lip it rests on and a piece of insulation on top.

This one is not your job. It's overhead work on a ladder. Put it on the list for a relative, a handyman, or the weatherization crew in Chapter 9 of the book, Help You've Already Paid For, who do exactly this at no charge in homes that qualify. Your part is to stand under it with a damp hand and find out whether it leaks.

14. Put foam gaskets behind the outlet covers on outside walls

What you'll notice: a cool breath of air from an outlet or light switch on an outside wall. The box behind the cover is a hole in the wall, and the wind finds it.

The no-tools version: push plastic child-safety caps into the outlets you never use on outside walls. Do that first and see if it's enough.

The fuller fix is a thin foam gasket that sits behind the cover plate. A packet costs a few dollars.

1. Switch off the breaker for that room, if your breakers are labeled and you're comfortable flipping one. Then plug a lamp you know works into the outlet. If it lights, the power is still on: stop, and have somebody else do this job.
2. With the lamp dark, undo the small screw in the middle of the cover plate and lift the plate off.
3. Lay the gasket over the outlet like a collar, put the plate back and snug the screw. Too tight and the plate cracks.

> **THE COVER PLATE ONLY**
>
> You are taking off a plastic plate and putting it back. That is all. Don't touch the outlet itself, don't loosen the screws that hold it in the box, and never touch a wire. If an outlet or its cover is warm, buzzing, loose or scorched, leave it alone, stop using it and call an electrician.

15. Bubble wrap on a window: the honest answer

People ask me every winter. You mist the glass with water, press a sheet of bubble wrap against it, and it clings.

On a bare single-pane window, it puts a layer of trapped air against the glass, and the glass feels less cold to sit beside. It costs nothing if you saved the wrap from a parcel.

It does nothing about drafts, because air leaks around the sash and the frame, not through the glass. It blurs the view and dims the light. On a window with two panes or a good storm, I wouldn't expect you to notice a difference. And I can't tell you what it saves, because I've never seen a number I trusted.

So: fine for a basement window or a back bedroom. For a window that leaks air, rope caulk or a film kit does more.

DONNA'S TIP · WORST FIRST

You don't have to do every window. Do the one that made your hand coldest on the draft walk, then sit in that room for an evening. You'll know by bedtime whether to keep going.

DON'T SEAL WHAT HAS TO BREATHE

Stopping drafts at windows and doors is safe. But never block or tape over a vent, grille or pipe that serves a furnace, boiler, water heater, dryer or gas stove. Things that burn fuel need air coming in and a clear way out for their fumes. If you've had a lot of sealing done and you have gas or oil appliances, ask your utility or a weatherization program for a combustion safety check. And have a carbon monoxide alarm and a smoke alarm on every level of the house and outside the bedrooms. Test them once a month.

THAT WAS 1 CHAPTER OF 20

Donna's Home Book

Sixty Ways to a Smaller Bill, and a House That's Easier After 60

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3 The Heat You Already Pay For

4 Warm the Person, Then the Room

5 Hot Water

6 Electricity

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14 The Bathroom

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17 More Space Without Moving

18 Living on Your Own, Well

19 Chores With Less Effort

20 Hiring Help Without Getting Taken

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