

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

Is it possible to use air conditioning less often even during the hottest days of summer? Air conditioning hasn't been around that long. By remembering the past and employing a few tricks from bygone times, we can save money and electricity, which helps our environment by reducing our use of fossil fuels. Conserving electricity also helps for those who are off-grid and don't have enough power to operate greedy AC units all day. A bonus for people who can't stand the noise of their various devices: it's much quieter without an AC running! But of course, if these strategies don't work for you or your house feels too hot when the AC is off, modern technology exists for a reason and keeping the house cool can save lives, so proceed with caution.

First, a tip that's possibly a no-brainer but one which many people hesitate to employ: opening and closing windows based on outdoor air temperature. Because having closed windows and blinds on a nice sunny day can feel depressing or stifling, the temptation is to leave both open whenever the AC is off. However, this allows the hot air outside to come inside, making the house warmer. If the home is well-insulated, you're better off closing windows and blinds while a fan circulates the air. If the temperature outside is cooler than the temperature inside, open the windows. Usually this happens at night, and putting a fan in the window helps usher in the cooler air. If it's getting hot outside, close the windows. If the sun is leaving beautiful traces of light (and heat) in certain spots of your house, close the blinds wherever it's shining through. This takes some observation and adjustments throughout the day because the sun's position in the sky changes.

Be warned that warm outdoor breezes trick our bodies into thinking that it's cooler than it really is outside, so a thermometer is a wonderful tool to bypass the illusion. Keep that thermometer in the shade if you want an accurate reading. It's also worth considering how polluted or fresh your outdoor air may be, whether or not your allergies are made worse by sleeping with an open window, and what the crime rate is in your neighborhood.

A few other tips from history: if the house is too hot and you're able to leave, do so! Sitting in the shade of a front porch on a rocking chair used to be a common practice. Eating cold watermelon and drinking iced tea or lemonade makes it even better. Soaking the feet in ice cold water is a quick relief. In the past, people enjoyed going to air conditioned movie theaters during the hottest part of the day to avoid the heat. These ideas won't work for everyone, of course.

If you are really serious, making the roof white will keep the house cooler in summer. Awnings and shade trees greatly reduce the amount of sun that can hit parts of the home. There are also alternative air conditioning devices but some don't work well in humid climates. Reducing the humidity indoors is actually a good way to make the air feel more comfortable, so you might try a dehumidifier that uses less electricity than an AC. It might be a combination of strategies plus trial and error that ultimately works for your family; experiment and find out how much AC you really need!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist living in an off-grid tiny house on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer tips to those wanting to make a difference at www.MakeRipples.org.