



Professionals

news

Here comes summer!

Look out, here comes summer - and possibly really big power bills.

This summer will be the first when householders and businesses have had to contend with the new higher charges for electricity, water and gas in conjunction with running air conditioners.

According to the Institute of Public Affairs, electricity costs rose between 16% and 61.3% in Australia's capital cities from 2005 to 2010. While Adelaide residents had a mere 16% rise to contend with, Sydneysiders' electricity costs rose by 61.3% during those five years.

Melbourne's electricity charges went up more than 56%, Brisbane's by over 50%, Canberra's almost 46%, and Darwin and Perth's almost 36%.

Archicentre, the building advisory services of the Australian Institute of Architects, said the sky rocketing costs of energy and water would be highlighted over summer and provide a strong focus on future housing design.

Archicentre's Victorian state manager David Hallett said rising power costs had contributed to putting sustainable housing design and 'green' retro-fitting on the economic and environmental agenda in Australia, with the use of air conditioning one of the prime drivers of peak demand.

Mr Hallett said the key to year-round comfort was passive solar design by highly trained architects who carefully combined materials, methods, building form and the sun's natural energy to help keep houses cool in summer and warm in winter.

"Insulation is paramount to the energy-wise home experience," he said.

"Lining the roof, walls and floor can reduce heat loss in winter and heat gain in summer.

"Materials with a high thermal mass, like stone,

brick or rammed earth, take a long time to heat up and a long time to cool down. Walls with a high thermal mass should be shaded to minimize a heat load in summer."

Mr Hallett said glass was a poor insulator and an energy efficient design should consider size, location, glazing type and window coverings like verandahs, canopies or deciduous trees. Other important factors included locating windows away from the western sun, and in some areas, the eastern sun, and closing curtains and angling blinds to reflect intense heat off the windows.

"Cross ventilation is an important design factor, and entails providing at least two carefully placed and treated openings in every room." Mr Hallett said.

"Louvres can direct the air flow towards the occupant of the room. "High level windows can allow unpleasant hot air to escape, resulting in the drawing in of cool air.

"Reversible ceiling fans are great in summer and winter. In winter they push the warmed air down to where you are sitting. In summer they disperse the air around the room."

Mr Hallett said energy conservation had become an increasing priority for property owners with people recognising that being able to design a passive solar home would save them thousands of dollars in the future and add extra value to the home when it was sold.



Hot Tip:

Experts say that to reduce energy use (and the consequent bills!), when using air conditioners maintain a temperature range of between 24 and 27 degrees Celsius. This should provide relief from the summer sting, but also keep the energy bill down.

Spring Safety

For those who live in the more southern parts of Australia, spring is the season of most action.

It's the time of year when gardens spring to life as plants emerge from the ground and the birds, bees and cats increase their families.

It's also the time when people in the cooler regions emerge from their homes to start spending more time outside.

And almost everywhere in Australia, spring is the time of year when home owners and home buyers begin migrating.

Spring is the real estate agent's busiest season.

With it comes a reminder that whether you are staying or going, you need to attend to those outdoor living areas.

Decks, balconies, pools, spas and barbecues are part of the great Australian way of life, wherever you live.

They can bring much fun and pleasure, but must be maintained in good condition to ensure they are accident and incident-free, safe places.

A fall from a deck or balcony, a collapsed structure, burns from a faulty barbecue or a child's unsupervised access to a pool can have devastating outcomes.

Decks should be checked for structural problems which may manifest in symptoms such as spongy flooring, loose or rusted nails, pooling water, rotten timber or loose balustrades.

When inspecting your balcony look for cracked, flaking or rusting render or concrete, pooling water, damp spots or stains in joining, mould growth or change in render colour, and unstable balustrades.

If necessary, call in a builder to check

the strength of the supports.

Balustrades should not only be firm and strong, but high enough to discourage people from sitting on them, or leaning over too far.

Look for slippery surfaces, particularly steps.

All steps should have hand rails on either side, with visibility lines on the outer edge of benefit to people with vision problems or at night.

Backyard pools are a particular hazard for babies, toddlers and small children and should be securely fenced on all four sides.

Check the childproof gate to make sure it is locking properly and remove anything near by such as a chair or plant pot which an adventurous child could use to undo it.

If you haven't used your pool or outdoor spa for some months, give it a good clean and check the water quality thoroughly to make sure it is not harbouring germs.

Give the barbecue a good going over too, to ensure it is in perfect working order.

Well maintained outdoor areas will not only enhance your enjoyment of summer, they will add value to your property when it comes time to sell.



Pet Preparation and Proofing

An estimated 63% of Australian households are home to a pet, with more than half owning a cat or a dog.

For many people, their pet is part of the family and accorded the attention given to any other member.

However, the needs of family members with four legs can vary from those of the two leggers.

Most people's dogs and cats spend a large proportion of their time out of doors. In fact, some are not allowed inside at all.

This means the yard or garden must be appropriate for them as a home.

It is essential the area is securely enclosed so the pet can't run out and get lost, run over or cause a nuisance.

A specially designed cat enclosure with access to and from the house is a great way to provide felines with fresh air and exercise while protecting birds and native animals.

It also keeps your cat out of neighbours' gardens.

For residents wanting to keep someone else's pet away, repellent granules are available.

If your dog has a penchant for pulling clothes off the line, hang out a bag of the granules with the washing.

A pet door provides a cat or dog with independence and means you don't have to keep getting up to open the door.

Make sure your cat enclosure includes a litter tray.

Even dogs can be encouraged to use the same area for their toilet needs but make sure you include cleaning up in your daily household tasks.

Ask at your local nursery about varieties of grass which are urine-resistant.

While there, check out the hardier plants such as grevillea which will withstand being laid on or jumped on.

Dogs and cats love to eat certain grasses for their nutritional and medicinal benefits. Grow some of these in low pots with frequent replanting to make sure they stay soft and palatable.

On the other hand, some plants are poisonous to pets. Steer clear of daphne, asparagus fern, aloe vera, jasmine, chrysanthemums, azaleas, rhododendrons and even sweet peas in areas where your pet plays.

If you are trying to sell your house, make sure you keep your pet out of the way when prospective purchasers call.

You may not notice it, but there's a good chance your home has a lingering pet smell which visitors may find offensive.

If selling, make sure the house is free of dog or cat hair, that the litter tray is out of sight and that the garden is totally poo-free.



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