

Debunking myths about how to care for your air conditioner

BY BRAYDEN GARCIA
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FORT WORTH

For many, air conditioning is nearly as essential as water during hot Texas summers when temperatures cross triple digits nearly every day.

Fort Worth has had an exceptionally hot July, with temperatures remaining well above 100 degrees. The constant heat is due to a ridge of high pressure that has impacted the central part of the United States since June.

A viral photo made the rounds across social media earlier this month of a homeowner placing an umbrella over an air conditioning unit hoping to make it more efficient.

The Star-Telegram spoke with J.D. Webb, owner and president of Webb Air Heating and Cooling in Fort Worth, to find out if the umbrella trick works and to discuss other myths we have about how to make our AC units work more efficiently:

IS PUTTING AN UMBRELLA OVER YOUR AC UNIT REALLY HELP?

Having the AC unit in the shade can definitely help it operate more efficiently, just don't do it with an umbrella, Webb said.

When the sun is beating down during the day, the metal on the unit absorbs the heat faster. Having the unit in a shady area can help cool down the the AC



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Fort Worth Police Chief Neil Noakes helps to install an air conditioning unit into Lanell Hayward Harris' southeast Fort Worth home on July 15, 2021.

unit — in turn making it more efficient.

Placing a tent or umbrella over the top of the unit only keeps the heat generated from the unit from dissipating, Webb said. The hot air could be sucked back into the unit causing it to run less efficiently.

"The 'Mary Poppins' idea probably would not be very successful," Webb said. "But having your unit in a shady area or a wall built that blocks the sun late in the day, definitely can help your unit."

WILL CHANGING THE AIR FILTERS ON YOUR AC UNIT HELP?

Yes, replacing a dirty filter will help the system

work better, Webb said.

One of the keys to air conditioning is airflow through the system. Having a dirty or clogged filter will impact the flow. If not enough air goes across the evaporator coil it can freeze up into a giant block of ice.

Keeping the filters clean or changing to another clean filter will make a noticeable difference, Webb said.

WILL BLOCKING OR CLOSING YOUR AC UNIT VENTS HELP SAVE MONEY?

No, closing AC unit vents does not help save on energy, Webb said.

An HVAC unit is designed to move a certain

amount of air across and through the system, to create "air changes" in the house. When the air is blocked off it makes the system run less efficiently.

If the outside compressor is running and one or two or all of the vents are closed, the unit still pulls in air into the house — meaning the unit is running and not saving on energy, Webb said.

DO CONDENSATION TABLETS FOR AC UNITS HELP?

Condensation tablets have nothing to do with making the AC unit work more efficiently, they have another purpose.

Condensation tablets are used to treat water

that collects in the drain pan and goes down the drain line to prevent algae or bacteria growth, which could clog the drain, Webb said. When water is condensed on the evaporator coil, water trickles down and goes into a drain pan and out the condensate line.

That's where bacteria and algae can grow from the evaporator coil, which can cause clogs and water damage, Webb said. The only thing a condensation tablets does is treat the impurities in the condensate drainage system.

SHOULD YOU SPRAY YOUR AC UNIT WITH WATER TO KEEP IT CLEAN?

Yes and no, but more often that not it needs to be done by a professional HVAC technician.

At least once a year, the outdoor condenser coil, which has little aluminum fins on it, need to be cleaned of grass, yard clippings or other debris, Webb said. The unit needs to be clean to ensure proper airflow in the unit otherwise it can overheat.

Webb said he has seen people take a sprinkler and point it in the direction of the AC unit to pepper it with water, which can temporarily help the unit cool off, but it's not a good long-term solution. The unit also needs to be turned off when being sprayed with water, as it can be an electrocution hazard.

This is a service that needs to be done, but preferably by a professional technician, Webb said.

TIPS ON KEEPING YOUR AC IN TOP SHAPE.

Every AC tip or trick

people see online might not always be legit, here Webb shares a few of his own tips:

- **Relationship** — Building a relationship with a contractor that you can trust is important, as they can service the AC unit every year. Just like a car that needs its oil changed regularly, the AC unit needs attention too.
- **Temperature check** — Turning the thermostat down to 60 degrees or lower does not help the unit create colder air, in reality, it increases run time which can cause the unit to freeze up.
- **Thermostat** — Most thermostats have a fan setting which either says "on" or "auto". Make sure the fan is in the auto position, because the "on" setting can cause humidity in the unit to increase, rather than decreasing and cooling.
- **Unit size** — When buying a new unit make sure to buy the appropriate size for your home. A bigger AC unit doesn't always mean better, as it can cause higher bills.
- **Professional** — If you don't know what you're doing when it comes to an AC unit, it's best to let a professional take a look before you damage yourself or the unit.
- **Replacement** — Replacing an AC unit in the between October and April can help save money on installation and cost.

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Hyperthermia has killed 10 elderly residents in Tarrant County

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FORT WORTH

Ten people have died in Tarrant County from hyperthermia since May, and the main cause has been elderly residents living without any air conditioners, officials with the Tarrant County Medical Examiner's Office said on Friday.

Triple-digit temperatures have burned North Texas for the past few weeks, and Tarrant County has seen its share of hot weather.

Officials with the medical examiner's office on Friday released the county's total of deaths related to the hot weather, which they began monitoring on May 1.

Hyperthermia is an abnormally high body temperature, according to the National Institutes of Health.

The first death was reported June 23, and the most recent one was Monday. Six men have passed away from hyperthermia and four women. The youngest was 58 and the oldest was 88.

Five of the people who died were living in a home without any air conditioners, according to the medical examiner's office. Two people were found outside, but they were not experiencing homelessness. Another two people died while they were living in homes with no working air conditioner.

One person was found dead in a White Settlement home with the air conditioner turned off, according to officials at the medical examiner's office.

Cooler days are not in



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Fort Worth temperatures are expected to be in the 100s for the next several days and most of August, according to the National Weather Service in Fort Worth.

the forecast for Tarrant County and North Texas.

For next week, temperatures will be at 100 degrees or higher, according to the National Weather Service in Fort Worth.

Here is the medical examiner's death toll because of hyperthermia

in Tarrant County:

- A 78-year-old Arlington woman died June 23; no air conditioner in the home.
- A 77-year-old Arlington man died July 9; no air conditioner in the home.
- An 88-year-old Fort Worth woman died July

9; found outside.

- A 71-year-old Fort Worth man died July 16; no air conditioner in the home.

- A 74-year-old Arlington woman died July 16; no air conditioner in the home.

- A 65-year-old man died July 17; no working air conditioner.

- A 58-year-old Fort Worth man died July 20; no working air conditioner.

- A 74-year-old White Settlement woman died July 21; air conditioner turned off.

- An 80-year-old Fort Worth man died July 23; no air conditioner in the home.

- An unidentified man died Monday; found outside.

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In this weather, even sunlight is igniting fires

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Nearly 460 acres of land were burned in Palo Pinto County last week, and experts are calling the cause of the fire unusual and downright strange.

The Texas sun was so hot on July 18 that when a trash can with glass bottles, paper and food waste was blown open, rays of sunlight hit the bottles and, like a kid using a magnifying glass to burn a hole in something for science class, ignited the paper inside.

The blaze near Possum Kingdom Lake, dubbed by the Texas A&M Forest Service the "1148 Fire," destroyed five homes.

Heather Gonzales, a program specialist with the forest service, said that while such a cause is possible, she'd never seen it before.

"A wildfire caused by that is definitely very rare," she told the Star-Telegram. "But one spark

is enough to cause these wildfire conditions. ... With the weather conditions, low fuel moisture conditions, we have been seeing some critical fire weather conditions taking place, and that makes any fuels more susceptible to ignitions."

Christopher Dicus, a professor of wildland fires and fuel management at California Polytechnic State University, who has worked toward preventing and fighting wildfires across the U.S. and internationally, said it was a new one for him, too.

"The circumstances can be right, much like with a magnifying glass, if you have the right sun hitting with the right temperature hitting the right fuel, it can hit that ignition temperature," Dicus said.

It's not the first time wildfires have been said to be started by sunlight hitting some sort of fire fuel after being magnified by a glass bottle.

For nearly a generation,

Australians were told that glass bottles left or thrown out on the roadside could start brush fires in the same way. A paper in 2006 from University of Melbourne professor John Schauble outlined the "rather 'doggy' science" behind that after researchers had found the risks were relatively non-existent.

But when conditions are right and the fuel is plentiful, Dicus said, this kind of fire starter is definitely possible.

Almost every county in Texas is currently under a burn ban, according to the Texas A&M Forest Service. In Tarrant County, Fire Marshal Randy Renois said the drought index has almost reached its maximum.

A Tarrant County burn ban was put into effect in June when the drought index, which measures the severity of drought, was at 735.

"We're getting close to 800, and after 800 I don't know," Renois said.

"It only goes to 800."

And while these conditions make it advisable to keep glass away from potential fire fuel and keep things like paper out of direct sunlight, this sort of cause still isn't likely.

Most Texas wildfires have been started by intentionally burning debris like trash and vegetation or even controlled burns that got out of hand, according to Gonzales. And the forest service has seen an increase in the number of fires started on roadsides.

Gonzales, Dicus and Renois all said things like cars driving over tall grass, chains dragging behind trailers or between the trailers and the trucks towing them and sparks spat by overheated catalytic converters have been starting more fires recently.

Dicus said even he and a fire chief in California accidentally almost risked starting a fire by driving their truck over tall grass when they were out in-

vestigating the cause of one that burned around 50,000 acres and was already extinguished.

"We sat there for a few seconds and then thought, 'Oh wow, we're idiots. We could have just started another fire,'" Dicus said.

In that case, they got the truck off the grass before anything ignited. But, he said, in extreme drought conditions it doesn't take long for grass to ignite because of something like that.

Gonzales said Texas drivers have likely seen an increase in large black patches of grass along roadways, and that's why. Firefighters across Texas, including Tarrant County, have been getting more calls about highway grass fires than usual.

And anybody can help prevent the start and spread of wildfires, she said.

If you see fire or smell smoke, call 911 and don't assume someone else has already reported it. Be mindful of where you

drive and make sure anything metal on your vehicle won't scrape or hit the roadway and cause sparks.

Make sure equipment doesn't overheat, don't throw lit cigarettes or cigarette butts on the ground and don't burn anything outdoors.

"Really just, be situationally aware of any spark that can happen," Gonzales said. "Even equipment overheating is something we've seen a lot of. It's already hot outside — it's easy for equipment to overheat. Just look around and see what could potentially overheat and what could potentially cause a fire."

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