



An Extended Guide · No. 1239

Buying a Used Generator

Getting a bargain
without buying a headache

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! Read this first — carbon monoxide is the real danger

A running generator's exhaust contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that can kill in minutes. Never run a generator indoors, in a garage, in a shed, or on a porch, not even with the door open and a fan going. Run it outside only, well away from the house — the safety agencies say at least 20 feet — with the exhaust pointed away from every window, door, and vent. Put battery-backup carbon-monoxide alarms on each floor and outside the bedrooms. If an alarm sounds, or anyone feels dizzy, sick, or sleepy, get everyone into fresh air first and ask questions later. That matters even more with a used generator, since most older units were built before the automatic shutoff existed — something we will weigh honestly in this guide.

Let's find you a good one, not a headache

A used generator can be a genuine bargain — the same steady power for a fraction of the cost. It can also be someone else's problem, quietly waiting to become yours. The difference almost always comes down to a few simple checks, done before any money changes hands.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. I don't sell generators and I never will, so when I tell you what to check before buying someone else's, it's just honest advice — the same thing I'd tell my own neighbor.

This guide walks through exactly what to look at, listen for, and ask, plus the red flags that mean it's time to walk away. None of it takes long, and all of it is worth doing before you hand over a dollar.

★ Bring me the listing

If you have found one and want a second opinion before you go look at it, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. I'll help you think through the questions to ask — free, with nothing to sell you.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, you're most of the way to a smart used-generator purchase.

- ❑ Never buy one you haven't seen start and run, in person.
- ❑ Check the oil, look for leaks and rust, and inspect the cords, outlets, and wheels.
- ❑ Ask its age, hours, maintenance history, and whether it has sat unused for a long stretch.
- ❑ Assume an older unit lacks the automatic carbon-monoxide shutoff, and plan your safety habits accordingly.
- ❑ Get the model and serial number so you know parts are findable.
- ❑ Test it under a real load before you agree to buy, not just at an idle.

✓ **Slow down, even if it feels like a good deal**

A generator that seems like a steal has a way of feeling less urgent once you have actually seen it run. Take your time with the checks on the next few pages — a good seller will not mind waiting.

Insist on seeing it run and start

This is the single most important rule in this whole guide, and it is not negotiable.

Ask the seller to start it cold, the way it would sit before an outage — not already warmed up and running when you arrive. A generator that starts easily from cold tells you far more than one that was fired up an hour before you showed up.

If a seller offers reasons why it can't be started for you — 'it just needs a new spark plug,' 'it ran fine last fall' — treat that as your answer. A generator you cannot see run is a generator you should not pay for.

! No exceptions for a good story

Every excuse for not starting it sounds reasonable in the moment. None of them are worth the risk of bringing home a machine that turns out not to run at all.

Look it over before it ever starts

A few minutes of looking tells you a lot about how a generator has been treated.

- **Oil:** pull the dipstick if you can — you want a clean, honey-brown color and a level that reads full, not dark, gritty, or low.
- **Leaks:** look underneath and around the engine for fuel or oil stains, old or fresh.
- **Rust:** a little surface rust on the frame is normal for an outdoor tool; heavy rust, especially near the fuel tank or engine, is not.
- **Cords and outlets:** check for cracked housings, exposed wire, bent prongs, or a scorched look around any outlet.
- **Wheels and handle:** cracked wheels or a wobbly, taped-up handle mean it has had a rough life getting moved around.

✓ Bring a flashlight and your phone

A flashlight helps you see into the underside and the fuel tank opening. Your phone camera is handy for photographing the model plate and any damage you find, so you can think it over later.

Listen with your ears, not just your eyes

Once it's running, stop looking for a minute and just listen. A generator's sound tells on it.

A healthy small engine settles into a smooth, steady, even rhythm within a few seconds. Let it run for several minutes, not just a few seconds, and see whether that steadiness holds.

Rough running, surging up and down on its own, knocking, or heavy vibration are all worth taking seriously. They might be minor and fixable, or they might be a sign of a tired engine — and you are not in a position to tell the difference on the spot.

✓ Watch the exhaust too

A little heat shimmer is normal. Thick blue or black smoke that does not clear after the first few seconds of warmup is worth asking about directly.

Ask about its past

A generator cannot tell you its own story. The seller has to — so ask, plainly and directly.

Q: How old is it, roughly?

Not to judge it on age alone, but to set expectations for wear and for how long the newer safety features have existed.

Q: Does it have an hour meter, and what does it read?

An hour meter turns 'lightly used' from a guess into an actual number, the same way mileage does for a car.

Q: What's the maintenance history — oil changes, filters?

A seller who can answer this, even loosely, has likely cared for it. A blank stare is itself useful information.

Q: Has it been run recently, or did it sit for a long stretch?

This is the single most telling question on this page — see the next one.

★ Take notes as you go

Jot down the answers, even roughly. If you are comparing a couple of listings, it is easy to mix up which one said what by the end of the day.

The phrase that should slow you down

'It just sat in the garage for a few years' sounds harmless. To a generator's carburetor, it usually is not.

Gasoline left sitting begins to break down within months, and old, stale fuel can gum up a carburetor's tiny passages. A generator that has sat unused for a long stretch, especially with old gas still in the tank, is one of the most common reasons a machine won't start — new owner or old.

That does not automatically rule a generator out. It might just need a carburetor cleaning, which a small-engine shop can often handle affordably. But it changes what you should expect on the day you test it, and it is worth asking about directly rather than hoping for the best. Our fuel-storage guide covers how fuel should have been kept fresh in the first place.

! 'Sat for years' plus 'won't start today'

If a seller tells you both in the same conversation, that is not a small generator problem you are being asked to buy — it is a small-engine repair project. Weigh it, or walk away, accordingly.

The safety feature most older units don't have

This is worth weighing honestly, not glossing over.

Newer generators increasingly include an automatic carbon-monoxide shutoff — a sensor that detects dangerous CO levels and stops the engine before it can hurt anyone, often built to the safety standard known as PGMA G300 or UL 2201. It's a genuine life-saving feature, and it is fairly new. Most older used generators simply predate it.

That is not automatically a dealbreaker — plenty of people run older generators safely for years. But it does mean the safety net is gone, and the outdoor placement rules and carbon-monoxide alarms become even more important, not less. Our carbon-monoxide safety guide covers the full rules; treat them as non-negotiable on an older unit.

! Ask directly, don't assume

Some sellers won't know whether their unit has the shutoff. Look for it on the control panel or in the manual, or ask about the model and year so you can check. If you cannot confirm it either way, run the generator as though it does not have one.

Get the model and serial number

A small step that saves real frustration down the road.

Every generator has a data plate, usually on the frame or near the control panel, listing its model and serial number. Photograph it before you buy, whether or not you go through with the purchase — it costs nothing and tells you a lot.

That information is what lets you find the manual online, order the right air filter or spark plug, and know whether a local small-engine shop can service it. A generator with no readable data plate, or one the seller has removed or painted over, is much harder to support for years to come.

✓ Search the model before you decide

A quick search of the model number, once you have it, often turns up the manual and sometimes other owners' experiences. A few minutes here can save you a surprise later.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

What you are asking a used generator to do shapes how carefully you should vet it. A backup for a few lights is a different bet than a machine your water depends on.

If you live in town or the suburbs

A used generator here is usually backing up the essentials — the fridge, some lights, maybe a window air conditioner. If it turns out to be a dud, you have options: a hardware store, a rental, or a different listing, all reasonably close by.

- A smaller, lightly used inverter-style unit is common here and usually easy to test in someone's driveway.
- Since outages tend to be shorter, a modest safety margin on age and hours is often an acceptable trade for a good price.
- You can more easily walk away from a bad deal and simply look at another listing.
- Still insist on the start-up test — convenience is never worth skipping it.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out on a well, the stakes climb — if this generator is meant to run the pump, its reliability is not just a comfort question, it's a water question. Vet it accordingly.

- Weigh the missing CO shutoff and any starting hesitation more seriously if this machine has real jobs to do, not just lights.
- Ask pointedly about hours and maintenance history — a rural used generator that ran a well pump for years has earned its wear differently than one that sat as a spare.
- A load test matters even more here; a generator that struggles under a modest load in the seller's yard will struggle with a well pump's surge at home.
- Being farther from a small-engine shop makes a clean, well-documented used unit worth paying a bit more for.

★ Tell me what it needs to do

A generator that just needs to keep the lights on is a very different purchase than one that needs to run your well. Tell me your situation and I'll help you weigh a specific listing. Call (330) 200-8042.

Ask to test it under a real load

A generator idling smoothly in a driveway is only half the story. Ask to see it actually do some work.

Bring something simple to plug in — a shop light, a fan, anything with a cord — or ask the seller if they have something handy. Watch how the generator responds: it should take the load smoothly, without stalling, bogging down, or surging.

This matters because a generator can sound fine at idle and still struggle once it's actually asked to deliver power. A real load, even a small one, tells you more in two minutes than an idling engine tells you in twenty.

✓ A few minutes, not a few seconds

Let it carry the load for several minutes if the seller is willing. A generator that starts strong and then falters is telling you something an instant test would have missed.

Meeting safely, and testing before you pay

A few sensible habits protect both your wallet and your well-being.

- Meet in daylight if you can, ideally at the seller's home where you can see how and where it's been kept.
- Bring someone along if you're able — a second set of eyes and ears helps, and it's simply safer than meeting a stranger alone.
- See it start, run, and carry a load before any money is handed over, every time, no exceptions.
- Handle payment the way you would for any private sale — meet in person, and never wire money for something you have not seen run.
- Get a simple bill of sale with the model and serial number, the price, and both your names, even if it's handwritten.

! Trust your gut over a good price

If a meeting or a deal feels off for any reason — pressure to decide fast, an unwillingness to meet in person, a price that seems too good to be true — walk away. A generator is never worth that risk.

Red flags and good signs, side by side

Keep this table in mind as you look, listen, and ask.

Red flag	Good sign
Won't start, or starts only after a long fight	Starts within a pull or two, cold
Seller is vague or evasive about its history	Seller answers age, hours, and use plainly
Dark, gritty, or low oil	Clean, honey-brown oil at the right level
Heavy rust, cracked wheels, damaged cords	Tidy, cared-for, stored indoors or covered
Pressure to pay before you can test it	Happy to start it and let you test a load

✓ **One red flag deserves a question, not a walkaway**

A single red flag might have a reasonable explanation — ask about it directly. It's a cluster of them, or a seller who won't answer, that should send you looking elsewhere.

A quick word on new versus used

Our guide on choosing a generator covers this trade-off from the buying side; here's the short version from the used-shopping seat.

New gets you a warranty, today's safety features, and the confidence that no one else's habits — good or bad — are baked into the machine. Used can be a genuine bargain when it's been cared for, verified by everything in this guide.

There is no wrong answer here, only an honest one: a well-vetted used generator that starts easily and runs smoothly is a perfectly good choice. One you're not fully sure about is a gamble dressed up as a bargain.

✓ When in doubt, sleep on it

A generator will still be for sale tomorrow, or a similar one will turn up. Very few used-generator decisions need to be made on the spot.

Once it's yours, start fresh

A little care on day one sets a used generator up like a new one, whatever its actual age.

If you're not fully confident in its maintenance history, treat yourself to an oil change early on — it's inexpensive peace of mind and gives you a known-clean starting point. Check or replace the air filter and spark plug too if you have any doubt about their age.

Then step onto the same schedule any generator deserves: check the oil before every use, exercise it under load every so often, and keep the fuel fresh. Our maintenance guide walks through that whole rhythm in detail.

★ Make sure the alarms are in place too

Before this generator ever runs at your house, make sure you have working carbon-monoxide alarms in place, especially if it lacks the automatic shutoff. That's true of any generator, but it matters most here.

Common mistakes used-generator buyers make

A handful of avoidable slip-ups account for most used-buying regret.

- **Buying without seeing it start** because the seller seemed trustworthy or the price was too good to pass up.
- **Skipping the load test** and judging it on an idle alone.
- **Not asking about the CO shutoff** and assuming every generator has one.
- **Ignoring 'it sat for years'** as a minor detail rather than the warning it usually is.
- **Paying before getting model information**, then struggling to find parts or a manual later.

! The costliest mistake

Buying a generator that turns out not to run reliably costs you twice — once in money, and again on the day you actually needed it and it let you down.

A simple checklist to bring along

Print this page, or keep it open on your phone, and check each box before you pay.

- ☐ I saw it start cold and run smoothly for several minutes.
- ☐ I checked the oil, and looked for leaks, rust, and damaged cords, outlets, or wheels.
- ☐ I asked its age, hours, maintenance history, and whether it sat unused for a long stretch.
- ☐ I know whether it has an automatic CO shutoff, and I have a plan either way.
- ☐ I photographed the model and serial number.
- ☐ I saw it carry a real load, not just idle.
- ☐ I met safely, in person, and got a simple bill of sale.

✓ No box left unchecked

If you can't honestly check every box, that's useful information too — it just might mean asking a few more questions before you decide.

If it won't start for the seller

This happens more often than you'd think, and how you handle it matters.

A generator that won't start for its own owner, in its own yard, with its own fuel, is not a good sign to talk yourself past. Politely ask the seller to sort it out and try again another day, or simply move on to another listing.

If you already own the generator and this is happening after the fact, our troubleshooting guide walks through the calm, step-by-step basics — fuel, choke, spark plug, and more — along with exactly when it's time to call a small-engine pro instead.

! Don't buy a repair project by accident

Unless you're deliberately shopping for a fixer-upper at a fixer-upper price, a generator that won't start today is a project, not a purchase. Price and decide accordingly.

Where to shop, sensibly

The venue matters almost as much as the machine.

Local, in-person sources — a neighbor, a local classifieds listing, an estate sale — let you do everything in this guide: see it, hear it, load-test it, and meet the seller face to face. That's worth favoring over a listing you can only arrange sight unseen.

Be extra cautious of a deal that only works by shipping, wiring money in advance, or meeting somewhere unusual. A generator is heavy and awkward to ship for a reason — most legitimate local sales happen in person, and that's a genuine advantage for you as the buyer.

✓ A dealer's used unit can be worth the premium

Some local equipment dealers sell serviced, tested used units, sometimes with a short warranty. You'll pay more than a private sale, but you're also buying some of the vetting in this guide already done for you.

Paying and paperwork

The last few minutes of the sale deserve the same care as the first.

Only pay once you've completed the checks in this guide to your satisfaction. A simple bill of sale — the model and serial number, the price, the date, and both your names — protects you and takes two minutes to write out by hand.

Ask if there's a manual, and take it if there is; if not, you already have the model number to find one. If the seller offers any spare parts, a spare spark plug, or fuel stabilizer that came with it, take those too — small extras that save you a trip later.

! Never send money for a generator you haven't seen run

No matter how good the photos look or how convincing the story is, never wire money, send a gift card, or pay in full before you have personally seen it start and run. This is one of the most common ways private-sale buyers get taken.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most from folks shopping for a used generator, answered plainly.

Q: Is buying used a bad idea?

Not at all — a well-cared-for used generator that starts easily and runs smoothly can be a genuine bargain. The checks in this guide are how you tell the good ones from the risky ones.

Q: How many hours is too many?

There's no magic number — a generator with real hours that was well maintained can outlast a low-hour one that sat neglected. History and current condition matter more than the number alone.

Q: Should I walk away if it doesn't have the CO shutoff?

Not necessarily — plenty of older generators run safely for years. Just go in knowing the safety net is gone, and be extra disciplined about placement and alarms.

Q: What if I can't test it under a real load?

That's a reasonable ask of any seller, and hesitation to allow it is itself worth noting. If it's truly not possible, weigh that as one more unknown in your decision.

★ Send me the listing before you decide

Shopping for a used generator is exactly the kind of thing I like helping with. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 with the details, and I'll give you my honest take.

You don't have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made buying a used generator feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't worry about memorizing anything.

When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I don't do the licensed electrical or gas work myself — for that I'll help you line up a trustworthy local pro.

★ Bill's Home Tech — real help, close to home

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or visit BillsHomeTech.com. Serving Atwater and all of Portage County. 30+ years of patient, plain-English tech help — and if you're ever not 100% happy with a visit, I'll make it right or refund it. That's a promise. — Bill

What to Check Before You Buy

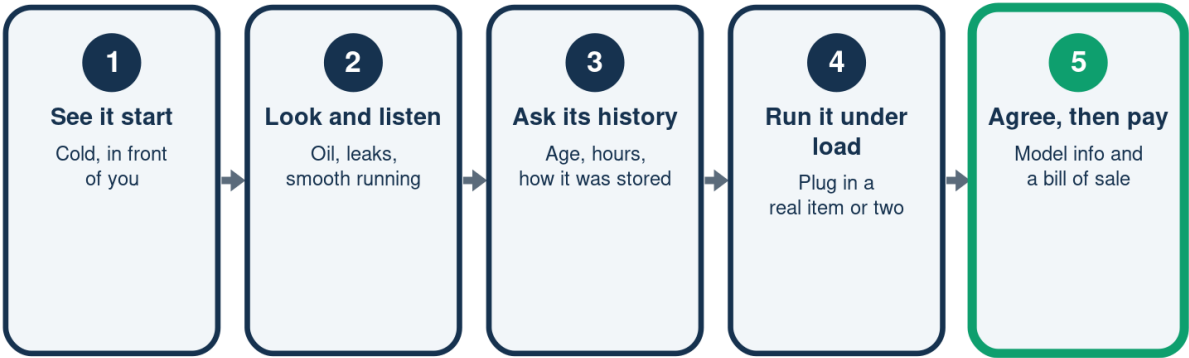
A quick walk-around before any money changes hands

	Red flag	Good sign
Oil	Dark, gritty, or low	Clean color, right level
Body and wheels	Heavy rust, cracked wheels	Solid, rolls freely
Cords and outlets	Damaged, scorched look	Clean, undamaged
Running sound	Rough, knocking, surging	Smooth and steady

If in doubt on any row, that's a reason to keep looking.

Buying a Used Generator, Step by Step

Do these in order, before you pay



A few minutes at each step saves a lot of regret.

What Older Units Often Miss

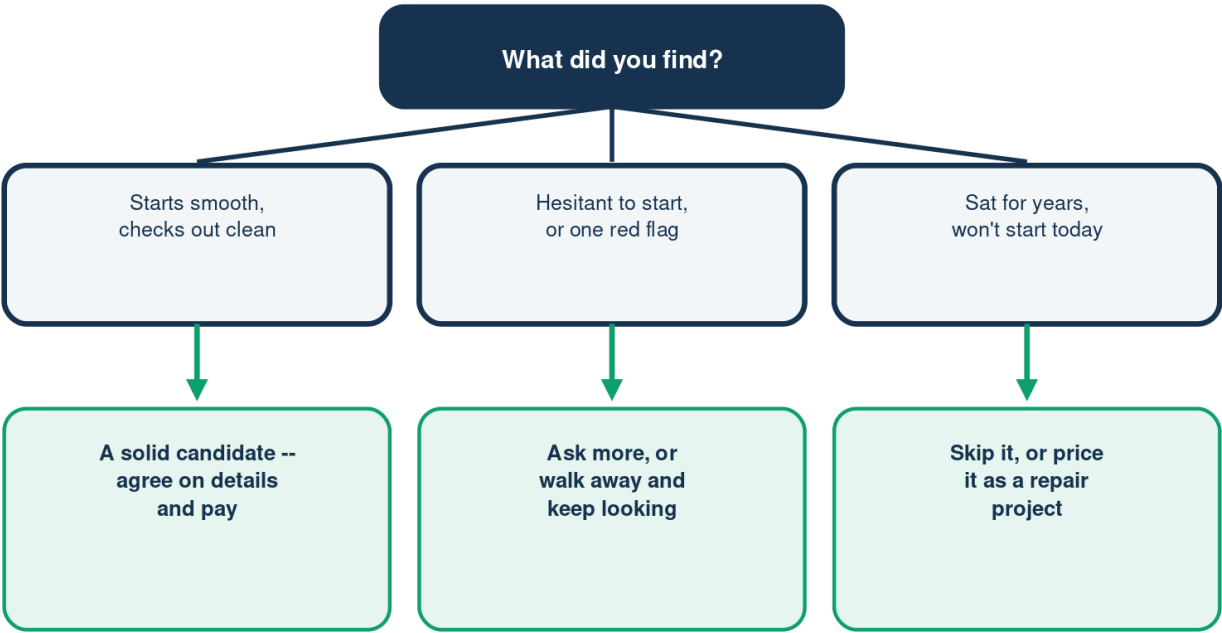
Weigh this honestly before you buy

	Typically has it?	Why it matters
CO shutoff	Often missing	Auto engine stop on high CO
Low-oil shutoff	Usually present	Protects the engine
Warranty	Rarely transfers	You're on your own for parts

No CO shutoff isn't a dealbreaker -- but plan for it.

Should You Buy This One?

What did the walk-around turn up?



No CO shutoff? Not a dealbreaker -- just add extra distance and alarms.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.



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A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that comes from using these guides. Thanks for reading, and stay safe out there.

— *Bill*



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