



An Extended Guide · No. 1291

Buying a Dual- or Tri-Fuel Generator: A Smart Shopper's Checklist

The checklist, feature by feature

Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal

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! Before you begin — a quick safety note.

This guide covers work involving engine exhaust, fuel, and household electricity, which can cause serious injury, fire, or property damage if something goes wrong. It's here for general information only, not professional advice. If you're not completely comfortable — or if your local codes require a licensed pro — please stop and hire a qualified generator installer. Turn off the power at the breaker before any electrical step. Never work on gas lines yourself; if you smell gas, leave right away and call your gas company or 911. There's no shame in calling a pro — that's often the smart, safe choice. You follow this guide at your own risk. — Bill

A Note From Bill

Shopping for a generator can feel like being handed a spec sheet in a foreign language — watts, amps, outlets, all before you've even decided on a fuel. This guide is the plain-English decoder.

I wrote it feature by feature, in the order I'd actually walk through it with a customer standing next to me at a store, or scrolling a listing together at the kitchen table.

What you'll get out of this guide

- The handful of features that actually matter, and the ones that mostly don't
- Why running AND starting watts both matter, on the fuel you'll really use
- When you genuinely need a 240-volt outlet, and when you don't
- How to spot a solid listing versus a mystery bargain
- Where inverter technology fits into the decision

★ No commission, no favorite brand

I don't sell generators, so there's nothing in it for me either way. I just want you to end up with the right one. (330) 200-8042 anytime.

The Whole Idea in One Page

If you read only one page today, make it this one.

- ❑ Confirm the fuels it actually offers, and that a tri-fuel model has a real natural-gas connection if that's part of your plan.
- ❑ Check both running and starting watts, specifically on the fuel you'll use most — not just the biggest number on the box.
- ❑ Look for a 240-volt outlet if a well pump or a whole-house transfer switch/interlock is anywhere in your plans.
- ❑ A built-in carbon-monoxide safety shutoff is a genuine plus, though it never replaces running outdoors.
- ❑ Buy from a retailer or dealer with a real warranty and support behind it — skip the mystery bargain.

✓ Bring this list with you

Whether you're standing in a store or reading a listing online, this checklist works exactly the same either way.

Start With the Fuels It Actually Offers

Every other decision follows from this one, so it comes first.

- A **dual-fuel** generator runs on gasoline or propane — the right fit for most homes, especially without a natural-gas line.
- A **tri-fuel** generator adds natural gas as a third option, which is worth it mainly if your home already has a gas line you'd like to use.
- Confirm a tri-fuel listing actually includes a natural-gas port and selector, not just gasoline and propane with “tri-fuel” loosely in the name.

There's a whole guide in this series on deciding between dual- and tri-fuel for your specific home, if you'd like to think it through in more depth.

✓ Cross-reference

See the dedicated guide on choosing dual- vs. tri-fuel in this series for the full decision.

Running Watts: On the Fuel You'll Actually Use

This is the number most people check first — and the one most people check wrong.

The big wattage number printed on the box is almost always the generator's **gasoline** rating. On propane you'll typically see roughly 5 to 15 percent fewer running watts (about 10 percent is common), and natural gas trims it further still. If propane or natural gas is your real outage plan, look specifically for that fuel's own rating rather than the gasoline headline.

! Ask for all three numbers

A good listing shows separate running watts for gasoline, propane, and natural gas. If only one number is shown, ask before you buy.

Starting Watts: Don't Skip This Number

Running watts tells you what a generator can sustain. Starting watts tells you whether it can actually get your motors going in the first place.

Anything with a motor — a fridge compressor, a well or sump pump, a furnace blower — needs a bigger jolt of power for a second or two to start than it needs once it's running. A generator that comfortably covers your running total can still fail to start a big motor if its starting watts fall short.

✓ There's a full worksheet for this

There's a dedicated guide in this series on sizing that walks through adding up running watts and the single biggest starting surge — worth doing before you shop, not after.

120-Volt vs. 240-Volt Outlets

This one detail decides whether a generator can do a very specific, very important job.

- Regular **120-volt** outlets cover everyday items — lamps, chargers, a fridge, a space heater.
- A **240-volt** outlet is what a well pump needs, and it's also what feeds a whole-house transfer switch or interlock setup.
- A 240-volt appliance simply cannot run on a 120-volt generator or outlet — this isn't a workaround situation, it's a hard no.
- If a well pump or a transfer switch/interlock is anywhere in your plans, confirm the 240-volt outlet before anything else.

! Don't assume — check the listing

Not every dual- or tri-fuel model includes a 240-volt outlet. If you need one, make it a non-negotiable line on your checklist.

Built-In CO Safety Shutoff

Many newer generators include a sensor that shuts the engine off automatically if carbon monoxide builds up nearby.

It's a genuinely useful safety net, and worth looking for on a spec sheet — generic terms like a CO sensor or CO shutoff are what to search for, without chasing any particular brand's marketing name for it. But please don't let this feature change how you use the generator: it's a backup layer, not a replacement for running it far outdoors every single time.

! A sensor is a backup, not a strategy

Even a generator with this feature must run outdoors, 20-plus feet from the house. The sensor is there for the times something still goes wrong — not an excuse to run it closer.

Electric Start vs. Pull Start

This one is mostly about your own hands and back, more than the generator itself.

- A **pull start** is simple and reliable, but it takes a real tug — worth considering honestly if strength or a shoulder or back issue is a factor.
- **Electric start** (often a key or a button) is easier physically, but relies on a battery that needs occasional charging or exercise to stay ready.
- Some models offer both, which is a nice hedge — pull start still works if the battery's ever low.

✓ Be honest about who's starting it

Picture who's actually going to be outside starting this thing at 6 a.m. in a storm, and shop accordingly.

Inverter vs. Conventional

Both make electricity; they just go about it differently, with real trade-offs either way.

- An **inverter** generator makes smoother, steadier power, runs quieter, and is often lighter — a great fit for sensitive electronics and close neighbors.
- A **conventional** generator typically offers more maximum power for the money, and is the more straightforward choice for heavier loads like a well pump.
- Both come in dual- and tri-fuel versions, so this choice is separate from the fuel decision.

There's a whole guide in this series devoted just to inverter dual-fuel generators if you want the full comparison before deciding.

✓ Cross-reference

See the dedicated inverter guide in this series for an honest, feature-by-feature look at whether the extra quiet is worth it for your home.

Noise: What to Ask About

I won't hand you a made-up decibel number — but a few honest questions get you most of the way there.

- Inverter models generally run quieter than conventional ones, especially at partial load.
- Among conventional models, noise varies enough by design that it's worth asking about directly, or reading real reviews, rather than assuming.
- Distance and placement affect what you and your neighbors actually hear far more than any single spec — the safe, far-from-the-house spot helps here too.

✓ Ask for a demo if you can

If noise really matters to you — close neighbors, a light sleeper in the house — ask a dealer if you can hear a model running before you commit.

Wheels, Weight, and Who's Actually Moving It

A generator that's a hassle to move to its safe spot doesn't get used the way it should.

- **Wheel kits** make a real difference for rolling a generator out to its outdoor spot and back, especially over grass or gravel.
- **Weight** matters most when the generator doesn't have wheels, or when it has to go up or down steps to get outside.
- If lifting or wheeling it yourself is a genuine concern, say so honestly while you're shopping — it should shape the model you choose.

✓ Test the path, not just the generator

Picture the actual path from storage to its outdoor spot at your home, inclines and all, before assuming any model will be easy to move.

Warranty and Manufacturer Support

This is the feature that matters most after you've owned it a year or two — easy to overlook while you're focused on watts.

- A real, clearly stated **warranty** is worth more than a slightly lower price with vague or no coverage.
- Check whether parts and service are genuinely available for the brand you're considering, not just the generator itself.
- A manufacturer with a responsive support line can save you real frustration if something ever goes wrong.

✓ Ask before you buy, not after

A quick question to the seller about warranty length and how service works tells you a lot about what you're actually buying.

Where to Buy: Avoiding Mystery Bargains

A generator is exactly the kind of purchase where the lowest price isn't automatically the best deal.

- Buy from an established retailer or dealer who stands behind what they sell, rather than an unfamiliar listing with no real support behind it.
- A price that seems far below every comparable model is worth a second look, not automatic excitement.
- A listing that's vague about fuel-specific wattages, warranty, or specs at all is a reason to ask more questions, or walk away.

! This is where corners get cut

A generator is safety equipment for your family during an outage. It's not the place to gamble on a bargain with no real backing.

Reading a Spec Sheet Like a Pro

Pulling everything together, here's what a genuinely good listing shows you, all in one place.

Check for	Why it matters
Wattage by fuel	Gasoline, propane, and natural gas ratings shown separately.
Running AND starting watts	Both numbers, not just one.
Outlet types	120V and, if you need it, 240V.
CO safety shutoff	A genuine plus, clearly stated.
Warranty terms	Length and what's actually covered.

★ **Send me a listing before you decide**

I'm glad to look over a generator you're considering against this whole checklist and give you my honest read — no commission, no sales pitch.

Shopping If You're in Town or the Suburbs

A few features tend to matter more for town and suburban households than others.

- Noise and a quieter, inverter-style unit are often worth the trade-off with neighbors close by.
- If you have a natural-gas line, a tri-fuel model can be a genuinely convenient fit — confirm the natural-gas port before buying.
- A modest running-watts total, covering the fridge, furnace blower, a few lights, and maybe a sump pump, is plenty for most in-town outages.
- Smaller storage spaces make weight and wheel quality worth a look before you buy.

✓ Don't over-buy

Many town households do very well with a smaller, quieter unit than they first assume they need — the checklist works the same either way.

Shopping If You're Rural or on a Well

Out in the country, a couple of items on this checklist stop being optional.

- A **240-volt outlet** is essential if a well pump is anywhere in the picture — there's a dedicated guide in this series on backing one up specifically.
- Starting watts deserve extra scrutiny, since a well pump's starting surge is often the single biggest number on your whole worksheet.
- A bigger propane supply and a generator with a comfortable sizing margin suit longer rural outages better than a bare-minimum unit.
- Wheels and weight matter even more here if the generator has to travel across a yard or gravel drive to reach its safe spot.

★ Bring me your well pump's label

If a well pump is part of the plan, its own nameplate numbers should really drive the whole purchase. I'm glad to help you match a generator to it honestly.

Questions to Ask Before You Buy

A short list of honest questions, asked before you hand over payment, tells you most of what you need to know.

- ☐ What are the running and starting watts on the fuel I'll actually use?
- ☐ Does it have a 240-volt outlet, if I need one?
- ☐ Is there a built-in CO safety shutoff?
- ☐ What's the warranty, and how does service work if something goes wrong?
- ☐ If it's tri-fuel, does it actually include a natural-gas connection and selector?

✓ A good seller won't mind these

Anyone selling a generator honestly should be glad to answer every one of these without hedging.

Red Flags While Shopping

A handful of warning signs are worth trusting when you see them.

- No wattage breakdown by fuel on a dual- or tri-fuel model.
- No warranty information listed anywhere, or a seller who's vague about it when asked.
- A price dramatically lower than comparable listings, with no explanation.
- Pressure to decide immediately, or a seller who brushes off your questions.

! Trust the pattern, not just one flag

One red flag alone might have an innocent explanation. Two or three together are a good reason to look elsewhere.

Keep These Three in Mind While You Shop

Whatever you end up buying, three safety basics apply the same way to every single model.

- **Carbon monoxide:** every generator's exhaust is dangerous, and every one must run **outdoors only**, at least **20 feet** from the house — no model changes that rule.
- **Fuel:** gasoline, propane, and natural gas each have their own safe handling and storage habits, whichever fuels your model offers.
- **Electrical connection:** whatever you buy, plan for a transfer switch, interlock, or proper cords — never a wall outlet — to actually use it.

There are dedicated guides in this series on each of these three if you'd like to go deeper once you've settled on a model.

! The safest generator is the one used safely

Every feature on this checklist matters less than these three habits. Keep them in mind on day one, not as an afterthought.

When to Give Me a Call

You can absolutely shop this checklist on your own — that's what it's for. But plenty of folks like a second, honest opinion before they buy.

- Reviewing a specific generator you're considering against this whole checklist.
- Helping you decide between dual- and tri-fuel, or inverter and conventional, for your home.
- Sizing it correctly for your essentials and the fuel you'll actually use.
- Setting up a safe way to connect and run it once you've bought it.
- A yearly check-up once it's home, so it's ready when you need it.

I come to you, here in Portage County and nearby, and I'll give you an honest read with no commission and no favorite brand to push.

★ Bill's Home Tech

Call or text (330) 200-8042. Tech Made Simple, Service Made Personal. Every visit is \$99 flat and 30-day come-back-free — if you're not happy, I'll make it right.

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Dog-ear this page or copy it onto a card. It's the quick answer to the things that come up most.

Check this	Why it matters
Fuels offered	Dual (gas/propane) or tri (adds natural gas) — match your home.
Running & starting watts	On the fuel you'll actually use, not the gasoline headline.
120V vs. 240V outlets	240V needed for a well pump or transfer switch/interlock.
CO safety shutoff	A genuine plus — never a replacement for running outdoors.
Warranty & support	Real coverage beats a mystery bargain every time.
Where you buy	A reputable retailer or dealer who stands behind it.
Get help	Call Bill: (330) 200-8042.

Words People Use

A few terms you may hear while shopping for a generator, in everyday language.
No quiz at the end.

Q: Dual-fuel / Tri-fuel

A generator that runs on gasoline or propane (dual), or adds natural gas as a third option (tri).
You pick one fuel at a time.

Q: Running watts

The steady power a device uses while it's on.

Q: Starting (surge) watts

The extra burst a motor needs for a moment when it first turns on.

Q: 240-volt outlet

The stronger outlet type needed for a well pump or a whole-house transfer switch/interlock setup.

Q: CO safety shutoff

A built-in sensor that shuts a generator's engine off if carbon monoxide builds up nearby — a backup, not a substitute for running outdoors.

Q: Inverter generator

A generator that makes smoother, quieter power, often at a higher price per watt than a conventional model.

Q: Derate

The dip in a generator's power output on propane or natural gas compared to its gasoline rating.

Q: Warranty

The manufacturer's promise to cover certain repairs or replacement for a stated period — worth checking before you buy, not after.

The Shopper's Checklist at a Glance

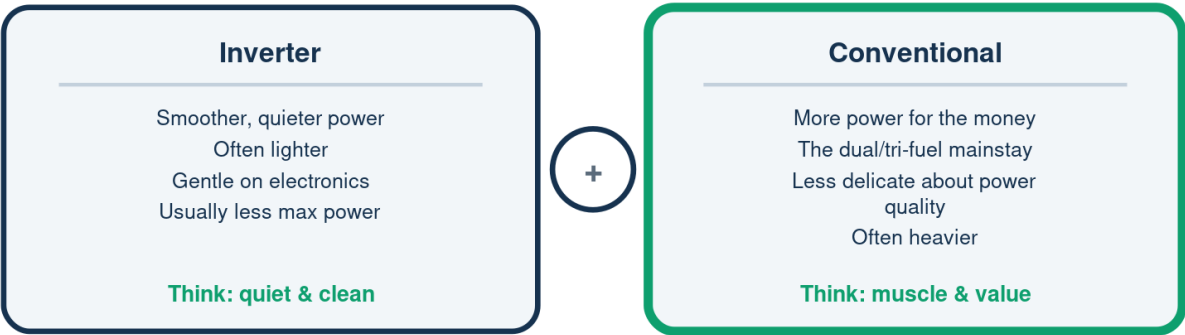
Five features that tell you almost everything

	Check This	Why It Matters
Fuels	Which ones, really	Match your home
Watts	Running & starting	On your real fuel
Outlets	120V and 240V	240V for pumps/switches
CO shutoff	Built in?	A genuine backup
Warranty	Real coverage	Skip mystery bargains

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

Inverter vs. Conventional

Both make electricity - a different feel to each



Either can be dual- or tri-fuel - the difference is the power itself

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

From First Look to Ready to Buy

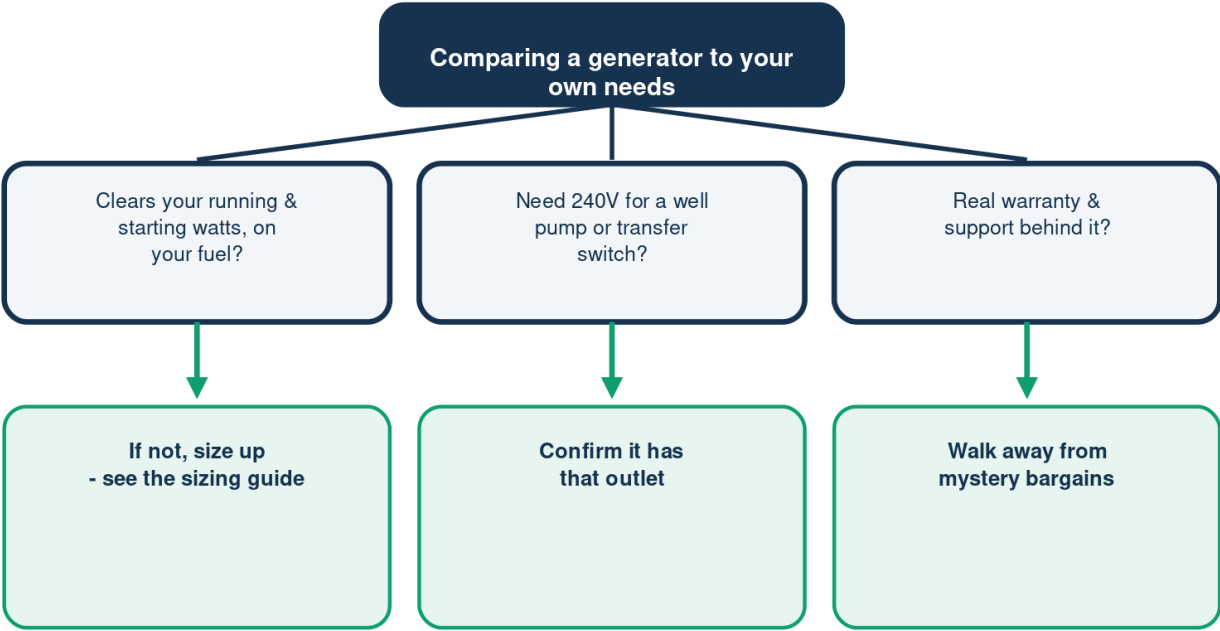
Four checks before you hand over payment



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

Is This Generator Right for You?

Three quick checks against your own needs



Whatever you buy, run it outdoors only, 20+ feet from the house - every time.

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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