



An Extended Guide · No. 1227

Extension Cords for Generators

The right cord, gauge,
and length, done safely

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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. A cord matters here too — the wrong one, coiled up tight or left lying in a puddle, can overheat or shock you long before carbon monoxide ever enters the picture, so we treat cords with the same care as the generator itself.

Let's get the cord right, too

A generator is only half the story. The cord that carries its power to your fridge, your lamps, or your furnace blower has its own rules — and getting them wrong can mean an overheated cord, a tripped breaker, or worse. This guide is the deep dive on doing that part safely.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. Cords are one of those things everybody assumes they already understand — until I ask what gauge they're using for a hundred-foot run to the back of the house, and I get a shrug. There's no shame in that; nobody teaches this in school.

The good news is that cords are one of the simplest parts of your whole generator setup to get right, once you know the handful of things that matter. We'll cover the cord itself, matching it to what you're running and how far, and the everyday habits that keep it safe.

★ Bring me a photo of your cord

If you already own a cord or two and aren't sure whether they're right for the job, snap a photo of the label printed on the jacket and text it to me at (330) 200-8042. I'll tell you straight whether it's up to the task.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, your cord will be safe and up to the job.

- ❑ Use only outdoor-rated cords — look for SJTW or STW printed on the jacket.
- ❑ Match the gauge to both the load AND the length — longer runs need a heavier (lower-number) gauge.
- ❑ For long runs, roughly 100 feet or more, or for heavy loads, step up to a heavier gauge, such as 10-gauge.
- ❑ Always fully uncoil a cord before you plug it in — a coiled cord can overheat.
- ❑ Keep every connection up off wet ground, and use a cover if it might get rained on.
- ❑ The generator's own heavy power cord, with its twist-lock plug, is a different thing from an ordinary outdoor extension cord.

✓ When in doubt, go heavier

A heavier-gauge cord than you strictly need costs a little more and is never wrong. A too-light cord for the load or the distance is where trouble starts.

Why the cord is not just a cord

It's tempting to grab whatever's coiled up in the garage. Resist that urge — a generator asks more of a cord than a lamp or a leaf blower ever will.

A generator sits outside, often on wet grass or a driveway, in weather an indoor cord was never built for. It can also be asked to carry a real load for hours at a stretch, over a longer run than the cord from your vacuum. Ordinary indoor extension cords simply aren't rated for any of that.

The wrong cord doesn't always fail dramatically. Often it just runs warm, wastes a little power, and quietly shortens its own life — until the day it does fail, usually at the worst possible moment. Getting this right once means never thinking about it again.

The two questions every cord has to answer

Is it rated for the outdoors and the weather? And is it heavy enough — meaning the right gauge — for what you're asking it to carry, over the distance you're asking it to carry it? The rest of this guide is just those two questions, in detail.

Outdoor-rated, every time

This is the one rule with no exceptions: only ever use a cord marked for outdoor use with your generator.

Look at the jacket — the outer covering of the cord — for a short string of letters. You're looking for a W in there, which marks it rated for wet, outdoor conditions. Indoor-only cords lack it, have a thinner jacket, and were never built to sit in dew, rain, or on cold concrete.

- **SJTW** — a common outdoor-rated cord jacket: junior service, thermoplastic, water-resistant.
- **STW** — a heavier-duty outdoor-rated jacket, often used on the generator's own power cord.
- Both are built to handle damp ground, sunlight, and being run across a yard or driveway.
- If the label doesn't mention outdoor or wet-location use at all, leave it in the garage for the vacuum.

! Indoor cords and generators don't mix

An indoor-only cord used outside with a generator can crack, fray, or short out in damp weather — a real shock and fire risk. It costs little to keep a couple of proper outdoor-rated cords on hand just for this job.

Reading '12/3 SJTW' like a pro

Once you know what the numbers and letters mean, that string of characters on the jacket tells you everything you need.

Take '12/3 SJTW' as an example. The first number, 12, is the wire gauge — how thick the copper inside is. The second number, 3, is the conductor count — three wires inside (hot, neutral, and ground), which is normal for a grounded outdoor cord. The letters, SJTW, are the jacket rating we just covered.

The gauge number is backwards from what feels natural

This trips up almost everyone the first time: a smaller gauge number means a thicker, heavier wire. A 10-gauge cord carries more power more safely than a 16-gauge cord. Thin, light cords — higher numbers — are for small jobs like a lamp; thick, heavy cords — lower numbers — are for real loads and long runs.

✓ Keep the label in mind when you shop

That printed jacket text is the only place a cord's real specifications live. There's no need to memorize anything — just know what you're looking for: the gauge number and the outdoor rating letters.

Match the gauge to what you're powering

A heavier load calls for a heavier-gauge cord. Here's the plain-English version, without a single invented number.

A lamp, a phone charger, or a small fan asks very little of a cord — a lighter-gauge cord handles it fine. A window air conditioner, a space heater, or anything with a real motor asks for a lot more, and needs a heavier-gauge cord to carry it without strain.

When two appliances share one cord through a splitter or a generator's multiple outlets, remember the cord has to comfortably carry the combined load, not just the bigger of the two.

✓ Not sure how heavy your load is?

Check the appliance's own nameplate the same way you would for sizing the generator itself — our sizing guide walks through reading one. When in doubt, choose the heavier-gauge cord; it's never the wrong choice.

Length matters just as much as load

Here's the part most people never learn: the same cord that's perfectly fine at twenty-five feet can struggle at a hundred.

Electricity loses a little steam as it travels down a wire — sometimes called voltage drop. A longer cord means more wire for the power to travel through, and a light-gauge cord makes that loss worse. The result can be a motor straining to start, a light bulb glowing dim, or a cord running warmer than it should.

The fix is simple: for a long run, roughly a hundred feet or more, or for a heavier load, step up to a heavier gauge — 10-gauge is a common choice for those longer, heavier-duty runs. A short cord can often get away with a lighter gauge; a long one shouldn't.

! A too-light cord over a long run gets warm for a reason

That warmth is wasted power and an early warning sign. If a cord feels more than just slightly warm to the touch while it's working, that load-and-length combination is asking too much of it — move up a gauge.

A quick reference to keep handy

Print this page, or just remember the pattern: shorter and lighter allows a lighter cord; longer and heavier calls for a heavier one.

Situation	What to reach for
A lamp or charger, a short run	A lighter-gauge outdoor cord is fine
A window AC or heater, a short run	Step up to a mid-weight gauge
Any real load, a long run (~100 ft+)	A heavier gauge, such as 10-gauge
Feeding a transfer switch or interlock	The generator's own heavy power cord

When your situation sits between two rows, choose the heavier option. The cost difference is small; the safety margin is not.

✓ **One cord, one clear job**

Resist plugging one extension cord into another to stretch its reach. Each added connection is another place for heat to build up — buy the length you need instead of chaining cords together.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Cords do a little different job depending on where you live — a short hop to a window unit in town, or a long haul across a rural yard.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or a tighter suburban lot, your generator is usually close to the house and close to what you're powering. Runs tend to be short, and a single mid-weight cord often covers everything on your list.

- Short runs to a few nearby appliances rarely need anything heavier than a mid-weight, outdoor-rated cord.
- Keep the generator well away from the house even on a small lot — see our carbon monoxide guide for exactly how far.
- A tidy setup matters too — a cover and a spot up off the walkway keeps a short cord from becoming a trip hazard for neighbors and family.
- One or two good cords is usually plenty; there's rarely a need for a long run at all.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, distances stretch — the generator may sit well away from the house, or you may be feeding an outbuilding, a barn, or a chest freezer in a detached garage.

- A run anywhere near a hundred feet or beyond calls for a heavier gauge, such as 10-gauge, to avoid voltage drop.
- Keep a couple of different lengths on hand — rural setups often need to reach farther than you'd guess.
- A cord can't reach a 240-volt well pump at all — that needs a transfer switch or interlock; see our guide on connecting a generator and our well-pump guide.
- Running a cord across gravel, mud, or a farm lane calls for extra care keeping connections up and dry.

★ Not sure what length or gauge you need?

Tell me roughly how far the cord needs to run and what you're powering, and I'll help you land on the right length and gauge before you buy. Call (330) 200-8042.

The generator's own power cord is a different animal

If you'll ever connect through a transfer switch or interlock, you'll meet a heavier, different kind of cord — worth understanding so you don't confuse it with an ordinary extension cord.

That cord is built to carry a much bigger combined load from the generator to your panel's inlet, so it's a heavy-gauge cord with a large twist-lock plug on each end — you turn it to lock it in, rather than just pushing it in like a household plug. It's usually sold or specified to match your particular transfer switch or interlock setup.

An ordinary outdoor extension cord, by contrast, is what you use to feed a few individual appliances directly, with standard household-style plugs. The two do different jobs and are not interchangeable.

✓ We keep the wiring side brief here

How the transfer switch or interlock itself works, and choosing between them, is covered in full in our guide on connecting a generator — that part is a licensed electrician's job either way, so this guide focuses on the cords you'll handle yourself.

Always uncoil it, completely

This is one of the most common cord mistakes I see, and one of the easiest to fix — and it deserves its own page.

A cord coiled up, even loosely, and then loaded with real power builds up heat in the center of the coil that has nowhere to go. Run it that way for a while under a real load, and that heat can be enough to damage the cord's insulation or, in rare cases, start a fire.

The fix costs nothing: before you plug in, stretch the whole cord out flat on the ground. Don't leave any loops or figure-eights bunched together, even if they're out of the way against a wall.

! A coiled, loaded cord is a fire risk

Always fully uncoil a cord before use, and let it lie flat while it's carrying a real load. Re-coil it only after you've unplugged it and it's had a chance to cool.

Keep every connection up off wet ground

Water and electricity are a bad mix, and the place two cords plug together is exactly where that mix likes to happen.

Wherever one cord meets another, or meets the generator or an appliance, that connection wants to be up off the ground — set on a stool, hung on a hook, or simply lifted onto something dry — rather than sitting in grass, snow, or a puddle.

- A dedicated cord cover or a purpose-made connector box keeps rain and snow off a connection you can't lift.
- Never set a connection directly on wet grass, gravel, or concrete, even briefly.
- GFCI protection — built into the generator's outlets, or added at the cord — adds another real layer of safety in damp conditions.
- If a connection does get wet, unplug it, let it dry fully, and check it for damage before using it again.

! When in doubt, treat it as live

Never touch a cord or connection with wet hands, or while standing in water. If something feels off — warm, damp inside a plug, or you feel even a mild tingle — unplug it at the generator first, then investigate.

A thirty-second check before every use

Cords live a hard life — dragged across gravel, coiled in a cold garage, run over by a wheelbarrow. A quick look before each use catches trouble early.

- ❑ No cracks, cuts, or brittle spots anywhere along the jacket.
- ❑ No exposed copper wire showing through the insulation.
- ❑ Both plugs are straight, with no bent, loose, or scorched-looking prongs.
- ❑ The cord doesn't feel unusually warm within the first few minutes of use.
- ❑ No sticky residue, mildew smell, or dampness inside either plug.

! Retire a damaged cord — don't tape it

A cord with a cut jacket or exposed wire is done. Electrical tape is not a repair for a cord carrying generator power — replace it. A new cord costs far less than a shock or a fire.

Getting the cord from the yard to the outlet

The stretch of cord between the generator and your window or door is often the part people think about least — and the part with the most everyday hazards.

Run it through a cracked window or a door propped just enough to pass the cord through, never through a fully closed door or window that pinches and slowly damages the insulation. Some hardware stores sell a thin, flat pass-through kit for exactly this if you'd rather not prop anything open.

Inside, keep the cord out of walkways where you'd trip over it after dark, and never run it under a rug or carpet — a covered cord hides heat and wear you'd otherwise notice, and a rug is fuel sitting right on top of a potential hazard.

✓ **Tape it down, don't hide it**

If the cord has to cross a walkway, run it along the baseboard and tape it flat and visible with bright tape, rather than tucking it under something. Seeing it is safer than forgetting it's there.

One cord, one job — skip the daisy chain

It's tempting to link cords together to stretch their reach, or to plug a power strip into the far end to add outlets. Both habits work against you.

Every extra connection is another place for a loose fit, moisture, or heat to build up. Two shorter cords joined together to make a long one are also very often two different gauges pretending to be one — and the weaker link decides what the whole run can safely carry.

The same goes for plugging a household power strip into the end of an outdoor cord to add outlets. Power strips aren't built for outdoor, generator-level use, and stacking more devices onto one cord than it was sized for defeats the matching work you just did.

✓ Buy the length you need

It costs a little more to buy one properly sized cord than to join two you already own, but it removes a weak point from the whole setup — and one solid cord is simpler to inspect, coil, and store.

Storing your cords between outages

A cord spends almost all its life coiled up somewhere, waiting. A little care in how it waits keeps it ready and keeps it lasting.

Let a cord dry completely before you coil it up — packing away a damp cord invites corrosion inside the plugs and mildew in the jacket. Coil it loosely, in big loops rather than tight kinks, and hang it on a hook or wind it onto a reel rather than leaving it in a tangled pile on the floor.

- Store cords somewhere dry and out of direct sun, which breaks down the jacket over time.
- Keep them away from a hot exhaust or any heat source, even in storage.
- A cord left kinked in the same tight loop for months can develop weak spots at the folds.
- Check a stored cord at the start of the season, before the day you actually need it.

✓ A cord reel is a small kindness to yourself

A simple hand-crank or wheeled reel keeps a long cord from becoming a tangled knot you have to fight with in the dark during the next outage. It's a small investment that pays off every time.

Common cord mistakes

A handful of avoidable slip-ups account for most cord trouble. Now you'll know them in advance.

- **Grabbing an indoor cord** because it was closest, without checking for outdoor-rated markings.
- **Using too light a gauge** for a long run, then wondering why the lights dim or a motor struggles.
- **Leaving it coiled** while it's working, so heat has nowhere to go.
- **Setting connections on wet ground** instead of lifting them up and covering them.
- **Daisy-chaining cords** to stretch their reach instead of buying the right length.
- **Never inspecting it**, until the day a crack or exposed wire turns into a real hazard.

! None of these are hard to avoid

Every mistake on this page takes thirty extra seconds to prevent and can take a lot longer to recover from if it goes wrong. That trade is always worth it.

Before you plug in — a simple checklist

Run through this list every time you set up, and a safe cord becomes a habit rather than a worry.

- ☐ The cord is marked for outdoor use — SJTW, STW, or similar.
- ☐ The gauge matches both what I'm powering and how far the cord has to run.
- ☐ It's fully uncoiled and lying flat, not looped or bunched.
- ☐ Every connection is up off wet ground, or covered if rain is possible.
- ☐ I've checked the jacket and both plugs for damage.
- ☐ It's routed clear of doorways, walkways, and anywhere it could be pinched.

★ Still unsure? Ask before you plug in

If you're ever standing there wondering whether a cord is up to the job, that's exactly the kind of quick question I'm happy to answer over the phone. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

Questions worth asking at the store

Whether you're talking to a hardware store clerk or to me, these questions get you to the right cord.

Q: What gauge is this cord, and is it outdoor-rated?

Both should be printed right on the jacket — if a clerk can't point them out, check the tag yourself or choose a different cord.

Q: Is this heavy enough for a run this long?

Length matters as much as load. Say your longest expected run out loud and ask them to confirm the gauge covers it.

Q: Is this the same as the generator's own power cord?

Probably not — that heavier cord with the twist-lock plug is usually a separate item matched to a transfer switch or interlock, not a general-purpose extension cord.

Q: How many amps can this cord carry safely?

A fair question with a printed answer on the label. It should comfortably clear what you intend to plug into it.

✓ There's no silly question

Cords seem simple until you're the one holding one in a store aisle. Asking twice beats guessing once.

Common Questions

The cord questions I hear most often, answered plainly.

Q: Can I just use the cord that came with my pressure washer or leaf blower?

Only if it's outdoor-rated and the right gauge for the load and distance — many lighter garden-tool cords are too light for a generator's real loads. Check the jacket before you reuse one.

Q: Does it matter which brand of cord I buy?

Not especially — focus on the jacket markings and the gauge rather than the name on the packaging. A properly rated cord from any maker does the job.

Q: How long can I leave a cord run set up?

As long as you need, as long as you keep checking it — inspect it periodically, keep connections dry, and bring it in when the outage ends rather than leaving it out indefinitely.

Q: Is a heavier gauge ever a bad idea?

No — a heavier cord than you strictly need is simply a little bulkier and pricier. It's never a safety downgrade.

★ Bring me your cord questions

Cords are a small, inexpensive part of the whole setup, but they're worth getting right. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and I'll help you sort out gauge and length for your home.

Bringing it all together

A cord earns very little glory, but a safe one is what actually gets the power from the generator to the fridge, the lamp, or the furnace blower without incident.

Outdoor-rated, matched in gauge to both the load and the length, fully uncoiled, kept up off wet ground, and checked before each use — that's the whole method. None of it requires guessing at a wattage number or buying anything exotic.

For everything past the cord — sizing your generator in the first place, or wiring a transfer switch or interlock for the things a cord can't reach — our sizing guide and our guide on connecting a generator pick up right where this one leaves off.

★ Let's make sure your setup is right

If you'd like a second set of eyes on your cords, your gauge choices, or your whole setup, that's exactly what a visit is for. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

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 extension cords for your 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

Which Gauge Cord Do You Need?

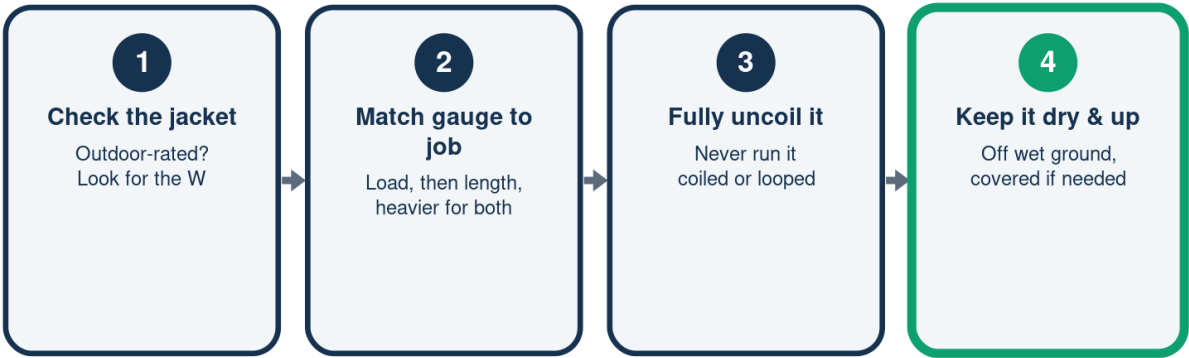
Lower numbers mean a thicker, heavier-duty cord

	Handles	Best for
16-gauge	Light loads only	Lamps, short runs
14-gauge	Moderate loads	Everyday cords
12-gauge	Heavier loads	Bigger appliances
10-gauge	Heavy loads	Long runs, ~100 ft+

When torn between two gauges, choose the heavier one.

Setting Up a Cord Safely

The same four steps, every single time



Do these in order and your cord setup is safe every time.

Know Which Cord You're Holding

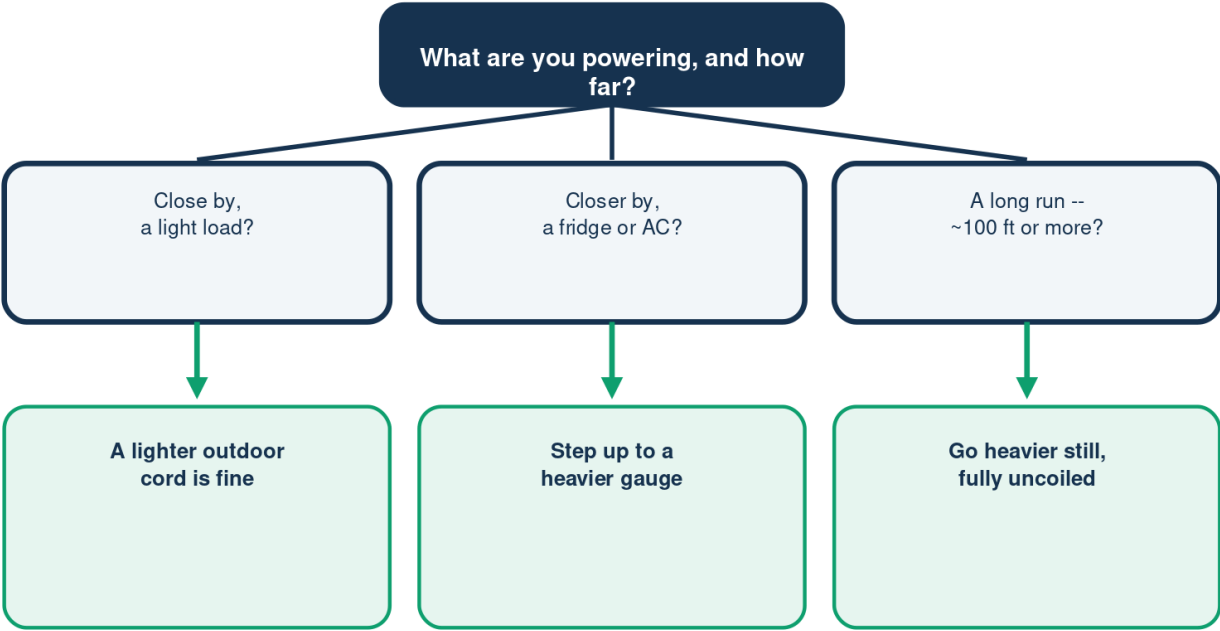
They are not interchangeable

	What it's for	Look for
Generator's power cord	Feeds a transfer switch	Heavy, twist-lock plug
Outdoor extension cord	Feeds one appliance	SJTW or STW jacket
Indoor household cord	Never for a generator	Not weather-rated

Know which cord you're holding before you plug it in.

Which Cord Fits Your Job?

Let your load and distance point the way



When torn between two gauges, the heavier one is always the safer choice.

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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