



An Extended Guide · No. 1217

How to Choose a Portable Generator

A calm, no-jargon buyer's guide
for your home

Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal

BillsHomeTech.com · (330) 200-8042 · Atwater, Ohio

Free & printable — share it with someone who needs it



Book a visit —
billshometech.com/book

! 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. We will come back to this on nearly every page, because with a generator it truly is the thing that matters most.

Let's pick the right one together

A portable generator is one of the most reassuring things you can own — a way to keep the lights on, the fridge cold, and the furnace running when the power goes out. This guide helps you choose one without the confusion, the jargon, or the fear of buying the wrong thing.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. I've spent 30+ years helping folks get comfortable with the gear in their homes, patiently and in plain language. Think of this guide as me sitting at your kitchen table, helping you think it through one question at a time.

There is no single 'best' generator — only the one that fits your home, your budget, and how you'd actually use it. So we won't chase specifications. We'll start with what you want to keep running and work calmly out from there.

★ You don't have to get this perfect

A generator is a big-feeling purchase, but you really only need to get a few things right. If you'd like a second opinion before you spend a dollar, call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and I'll talk it through with you — free, and with nothing to sell you.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, you're already most of the way to a smart choice.

- ❑ Start with what you must keep running, not with a watt number.
- ❑ Motors — fridges, furnaces, pumps — need a big surge to start, far more than they use once running. Size for that surge.
- ❑ Decide how you'll feed the power in: cords for a few things, or an electrician-installed hookup for the whole panel.
- ❑ Pick your fuel: gasoline is easy to find; propane stores for years and burns cleaner. Many units now do both.
- ❑ Insist on two safety features: an automatic carbon-monoxide shutoff and a low-oil shutoff.
- ❑ Never, ever run it indoors or in an attached garage — outside only, well away from the house.

✓ One rule to hold onto

Buy a little more capacity than you think you need, within reason. A generator that loafs along at half its limit is quieter, sips less fuel, and lasts longer than one straining at its maximum.

Start with what you want to keep running

The most important page in this guide, and the one people skip. Before you look at a single machine, make a short list.

Walk through your home and ask, 'If the power were out for two days, what would I truly want working?' Write it down. Most lists sort neatly into three levels, and where yours lands points straight to the size of generator you need.

Level one — the essentials

The refrigerator and freezer, a few lights, phones and a tablet charging, the internet box, and any medical device you rely on. This keeps food safe and keeps you connected. A smaller generator handles it.

Level two — comfort

Add the furnace's blower or the boiler, a window air conditioner, the microwave, the coffee maker, maybe a sump pump. Now you're into a mid-sized machine.

Level three — most of the house

Add a well pump, an electric water heater, or central air, and you need a large generator wired into your home's electrical panel. More on that later, and it's a job for a licensed electrician.

★ Bring me your list

That little list is the whole ballgame. If you jot down what you'd want running and text me a photo, I can tell you roughly what size to shop for — no guessing, no overbuying.

The one idea that prevents costly mistakes

You'll see two wattage numbers on every generator. Understanding the difference is what keeps you from buying one that's too small.

Running watts

This is the power a generator can supply steadily, hour after hour. It's the number that matters for things like lights and a running refrigerator.

Starting watts (the surge)

Anything with a motor — a fridge, a furnace fan, a well pump, an air conditioner — needs a brief, much larger jolt of power to get spinning, often several times its running watts, for just a second or two. That surge is the number that trips people up.

Here's the plain-English way to size it: add up the running watts of everything you'd run at once, then add the single biggest surge on top. Your generator's starting-watt rating needs to clear that total with a little room to spare. The exact figures live on each appliance's label — we cover reading those in the sizing guide.

✓ Don't trust the big number on the box

The largest, boldest watt number on the carton is usually the brief peak. The honest number to plan around is the running (or 'rated') watts. If a unit lists only one giant number, be a little skeptical.

The rough size classes, in plain terms

Generators come in a few broad sizes. You don't need exact numbers yet — just a feel for which class fits the list you made.

Small and quiet

Often the 'inverter' style. Light enough to carry, quiet enough to talk over, and thrifty with fuel. Wonderful for the essentials — fridge, lights, phones, the internet, a CPAP. Usually not enough for a furnace plus everything else at once, and typically no 240-volt outlet for a well pump.

Mid-sized

The most popular family of home-backup generators. Enough to keep the essentials going and add real comfort — the furnace, a window air conditioner, the microwave. Heavier, with wheels. Many offer a 240-volt outlet so they can feed a panel through a proper hookup.

Large

Powerful enough for a well pump, an electric water heater, or central air, wired into your home's panel. They're big, thirsty, and heavier to move, but for a rural home on a well they can be the difference between camping and carrying on.

! Bigger isn't automatically better

An oversized generator costs more, burns more fuel, weighs more, and makes more noise — and running one lightly loaded all the time isn't ideal for it either. Match the machine to your list, plus a sensible cushion.

Gasoline, propane, or both?

Your choice of fuel shapes how the generator lives in your garage and how it behaves in an emergency. Here's the honest comparison.

Gasoline

Easy to find and gives a generator its full power. The catch is storage: gasoline goes stale in a matter of months and can gum up an engine, so it needs stabilizer and rotation. And in a widespread outage, the stations may be down too.

Propane

The kind in a barbecue tank. It stores for years without going bad, burns cleaner, and produces markedly less carbon monoxide than gasoline (though never zero — the outdoor rule still holds). It gives up a little power versus gas and won't flow as well in bitter cold.

Dual-fuel — the flexible middle

Many generators now run on either, switched with a knob. That flexibility is a genuine comfort: keep a couple of propane tanks for the long haul and use gasoline when it's handy. We go deeper in the fuel-types guide.

✓ For a machine that mostly waits

If your generator will sit unused for months between outages, propane's long shelf life is a real advantage — there's no stale fuel to deal with when you need it most. A dual-fuel unit gives you the best of both.

How you'll get the power into the house

This decision matters before you buy, because it affects which outlets — and how much power — you actually need.

Heavy-duty extension cords

The simplest, no-wiring path: run outdoor-rated cords from the generator to a few appliances. Perfectly safe and often all a smaller home needs. The limits are obvious — you can't cord-feed a furnace or a well pump, and cords through a doorway are a trip hazard to manage.

A transfer switch or interlock kit

To power things that are wired in — the furnace, the well pump, whole circuits — an electrician installs either a transfer switch or an interlock kit at your panel. Then one heavy cord feeds your chosen circuits safely. This needs a 240-volt outlet on the generator, so it's worth deciding now.

! Never use a 'suicide cord'

You may hear about a cord with a plug on both ends run into a dryer outlet to 'backfeed' the house. Do not. It can put deadly voltage on the outside power lines, electrocuting a utility worker, and it's a fire risk to you. The only safe hookups are a transfer switch or an interlock kit, installed by a licensed electrician.

The features that actually matter

Skip the marketing extras. These are the ones that make a generator safer, easier, and friendlier to live with.

- **Automatic CO shutoff:** a built-in sensor that kills the engine if carbon monoxide climbs dangerously. The most important feature on this whole page — more on the next page.
- **Low-oil shutoff:** stops the engine before it can ruin itself for lack of oil. Nearly standard now, but confirm it's there.
- **Electric or push-button start:** no yanking a pull-cord. A real kindness for anyone with a sore shoulder or arthritis, and a blessing on a cold morning.
- **A fuel gauge:** so you're not guessing how much runtime is left.
- **The right outlets:** ordinary household outlets for cords, and a 240-volt outlet if you'll ever use a transfer switch.
- **Never-flat wheels and a fold-down handle:** because you'll be moving it in bad weather, not ideal conditions.

✓ An hour meter is a quiet helper

Some generators count their running hours, like a car's odometer. It makes oil changes and maintenance easy to keep track of — a small feature that pays off over the years.

The carbon-monoxide shutoff is worth insisting on

If you take one shopping instruction from me, let it be this one. It is, quite literally, a lifesaver.

Portable generators send out carbon monoxide — a gas you can't see or smell — and every year it takes lives, often because a generator was run in a garage or too close to a window. A newer safety feature fights back: a sensor that detects rising carbon monoxide and automatically shuts the engine off before it can hurt anyone.

On the box you'll see names like 'CO shutoff,' 'CO sensor,' or a note that it meets the safety standard known as PGMA G300 or UL 2201. Different makers use different brand names for it, but they do the same vital job. I steer every customer toward a model that has it.

! A backstop, not a permission slip

The shutoff is a wonderful safety net, but it is not a license to run the generator closer to the house. You still run it outside only, well away, with the exhaust pointed away — and you still put carbon-monoxide alarms inside. The sensor is your last line of defense, not your first.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Who you are shapes what you should buy. The right generator for a tidy in-town lot is often not the right one for a farmhouse on a private well.

If you live in town or the suburbs

Outages here tend to be shorter, the lot is smaller, and the neighbors are close. Your water keeps flowing from the city main whether the power is on or not, so you're powering food, warmth, and connection — not a pump.

- A small-to-mid quiet generator usually covers the essentials nicely.
- Cords, or a modest interlock hookup, are often plenty.
- Noise matters — a quieter inverter unit keeps the peace after dark.
- No well pump means you rarely need a big 240-volt machine.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country the story changes. When the power quits, your well pump quits with it — no electricity means no water for drinking, cooking, flushing, or the animals. Outages also tend to run longer past the last mile of line.

- A well pump is 240-volt and needs a hefty surge to start — plan for a larger generator with room to spare.
- A transfer switch or interlock, installed by an electrician, is the practical way to feed the pump and the furnace.
- Longer outages reward propane's long shelf life and a bigger fuel plan.
- A sump pump and a chest freezer often belong on your must-run list too.

★ Not sure which camp you're in?

Plenty of homes sit right in the middle. Tell me your setup — city water or a well, how long your outages usually last — and I'll help you land on the right size without overspending. Call (330) 200-8042.

Noise, and being a good neighbor

A generator you'll actually be glad to run is one you can stand to be near. Noise is easy to overlook in the store and impossible to ignore at 2 a.m.

Older-style generators run at a constant roar. The newer inverter type can throttle down when little is being used, so it purrs instead of roars and sips less fuel. If quiet matters to you — and near neighbors, it should — an inverter is worth the premium.

Placement helps too: distance, a solid surface, and pointing the exhaust away from bedrooms all soften the sound. We devote a whole guide to running quietly, but it's worth weighing before you buy.

✓ Check the rules where you live

Some towns and many neighborhood associations have quiet hours or rules about generators. A quick check now saves an awkward conversation later — and points you toward a quieter model if you'll need one.

Can you actually move it and start it?

The finest generator in the world is no help if you can't wheel it out and get it going. This page is especially for us as we get older.

Generators are heavy — the bigger, the heavier. Look for sturdy, never-flat wheels and a comfortable fold-down handle, and picture the trip from where it's stored to where it runs, in the rain, in the dark. If that trip looks hard, size down or plan for a helper.

Starting matters just as much. A pull-cord can be a real struggle with a sore shoulder or on a frigid morning. Electric or push-button start turns that into pressing a button — I recommend it for almost everyone.

★ Let's set it up so it's easy on you

On a visit I can figure out the easiest path to roll it, the best spot to run it safely, and make sure you can start it without straining. Getting these small things right is what makes a generator something you'll actually use. Call (330) 200-8042.

Where it will live between outages

A generator spends almost all its life waiting. Where and how it waits decides whether it starts on the first pull when you finally need it.

It wants a dry, ventilated spot out of the weather — a garage or shed is fine for storage (never for running). It should never live in your living space, and the fuel for it belongs in proper containers, stored away from the house and any flame or pilot light.

Think, too, about security. In a long outage a generator left running in the yard is a tempting target, so a cable and lock and a well-chosen spot are worth planning for.

✓ A waiting generator still needs a little love

Fuel left sitting is the number-one reason a generator won't start when you need it. Whichever you buy, plan to either run it dry for storage or keep the fuel fresh with stabilizer — the maintenance and storage guides walk you through both.

New or used?

A good used generator can be a bargain. A neglected one can be a headache that never starts. Here's the short version.

Buying new gets you a warranty, the latest safety features — including that carbon-monoxide shutoff, which older units lack — and the confidence that it's never been run dry of oil. For many folks, that peace of mind is worth it for something you're counting on in an emergency.

If you do shop used, buy from someone who'll start it in front of you, and favor a unit that's been run and maintained over one that 'sat in the garage for years' (that usually means gummed-up fuel). Our buying-used guide has a full checklist.

! The missing safety feature to weigh

Most older generators have no automatic CO shutoff — the feature simply didn't exist yet. If you buy used, you're likely giving that up, so be extra disciplined about placement and carbon-monoxide alarms.

The true cost picture

The sticker on the generator isn't the whole story. Knowing the other pieces up front keeps there from being surprises.

Beyond the machine itself, a complete, safe setup usually includes a few outdoor-rated extension cords, a set of carbon-monoxide alarms for inside the house, fuel and storage containers, and — if you want to power wired-in things like the furnace or well — an electrician's visit to fit a transfer switch or interlock.

None of this is meant to scare you off; it's to help you budget the whole job rather than just the first part. A right-sized generator with the proper accessories, bought once and cared for, serves for many years.

★ I'll help you plan the whole thing

I don't sell generators and I earn no commission, so my advice is just advice. Tell me your home and your list, and I'll help you map out the full setup — machine, cords, alarms, and who to call for the wiring — so there are no surprises. Call (330) 200-8042.

A simple shopping checklist

Bring this to the store or keep it open while you shop online. Check each box before you buy.

- ☐ It comfortably covers my running watts plus the biggest single surge.
- ☐ It has an automatic carbon-monoxide shutoff (CO sensor).
- ☐ It has a low-oil shutoff.
- ☐ It has electric or push-button start, if a pull-cord would be hard.
- ☐ It has the outlets I need — including 240-volt if I'll use a hookup.
- ☐ It has sturdy wheels and a handle I can actually manage.
- ☐ It runs the fuel I want — gasoline, propane, or both.
- ☐ It comes with a warranty and parts I can get locally.

✓ Photograph the label

Before you decide, snap a photo of the specification label and text it to me if you like. Two minutes of a second opinion can save a return trip and a lot of second-guessing.

Common mistakes people make

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

- **Buying too small** by forgetting the starting surge of a motor, then wondering why the fridge won't kick on.
- **Buying far too big** out of worry, and ending up with a heavy, thirsty, noisy machine you dread rolling out.
- **Skipping the CO shutoff** to save a little money on a feature that protects your life.
- **No plan for the hookup** — discovering only after the storm that there's no safe way to reach the furnace or well.
- **Letting fuel go stale**, so the machine that cost real money won't start on the one night it's needed.

! The dangerous mistake

Every other mistake here costs money or comfort. Running a generator in a garage or too near the house can cost a life. If you take nothing else from this guide, take the outdoor rule and the CO alarms.

Setting honest expectations

A portable generator is a fine friend in an outage. Knowing what it is — and isn't — keeps you happy with your choice.

A portable is not the same as a permanent, whole-home standby generator that switches on by itself and runs the entire house. A portable means going outside, starting it, and choosing what to power. That's a fair trade for a fraction of the cost — as long as you expect it.

You'll likely run some things and not others, perhaps taking turns — the well pump for a while, then the furnace, then charging the phones. That's normal, and a right-sized machine makes the juggling easy rather than frantic.

✓ If you want hands-off, know your options

If the idea of going out to start it feels like too much, that's worth saying out loud — a permanent standby unit or a home battery may suit you better. I'm glad to talk through the trade-offs honestly, with no sales pitch.

A word on brands and warranties

I won't push a brand on you — but I will tell you what to look for so you buy something that'll still be running years from now.

Favor an established maker with a real warranty and parts you can actually get. When it's time for an air filter, a spark plug, or an oil change, you want those to be a quick trip to the store, not a hunt for an obscure part from overseas.

Read the warranty's length and what it covers, and see whether there's service support near you. A rock-bottom price on an off-brand unit can turn expensive the first time it needs a part nobody stocks.

★ Ask before you're dazzled by a deal

A big discount is tempting, but a generator is a buy-it-once item. If you're weighing two models or a too-good-to-be-true sale, send them my way and I'll give you my honest read. Call (330) 200-8042.

Questions to ask before you buy

Whether you're talking to a salesperson or to me, these are the questions that get you to the right machine.

Q: What's the running-watt rating, honestly — not just the peak?

This is the number you plan your home around. If they only quote the big surge figure, ask again for the steady, rated watts.

Q: Does it have an automatic carbon-monoxide shutoff?

The one non-negotiable. If the answer is no, keep looking, or accept that you'll have to be doubly careful about placement and alarms.

Q: Can it feed my furnace or well pump, and how?

If yes, you'll need a 240-volt outlet and an electrician-installed transfer switch or interlock. Sort this out before you buy.

Q: How heavy is it, and how do I move and start it?

Be honest about what you can wheel and start. Electric start and good wheels are worth real money to your future self.

✓ There's no silly question

If a salesperson makes you feel rushed or foolish for asking, that's a reason to walk away, not to buy. A good answer to a plain question is the least you should expect.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most from folks choosing their first generator, answered plainly.

Q: Can't I just get the biggest one to be safe?

You can, but you'll pay for it in weight, fuel, and noise, and it's not good for the engine to loaf far below its capacity all the time. A right-sized unit with a sensible cushion is the sweet spot.

Q: Do I need one that connects to my whole house?

Only if you want to power things that are wired in, like a furnace or well pump. Many in-town homes do fine running a few things on cords.

Q: Is propane really better than gas?

It's better for storing — it lasts for years and burns cleaner. Gas gives a bit more power and is easy to find. Dual-fuel lets you stop choosing and have both.

Q: How long will a portable generator last?

Cared for — fresh fuel, regular oil changes, kept dry — a quality portable can serve for many years and many outages. Neglected, it may not start when you need it. The care is the secret.

★ Still weighing it up?

Choosing a generator is exactly the kind of thing I love to help with, because getting it right once saves years of frustration. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and let's find the one that fits your home.

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 choosing a 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

How Much Generator Do You Need?

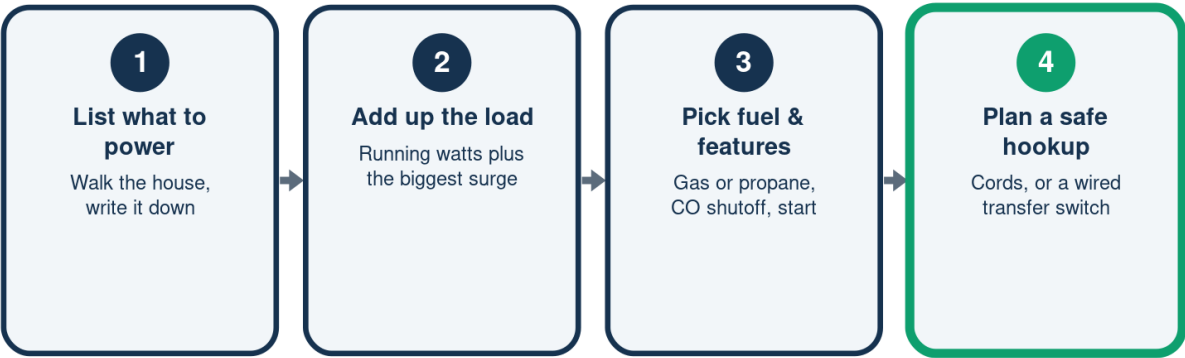
Start with what you'd keep running, not a watt number

	What it covers	Roughly what it takes
The essentials	Fridge, lights, phones	A small, quiet unit
Add comfort	Furnace fan, window AC	A mid-sized unit
Most of the house	Well pump, water heater	A large unit + hookup
The surge rule	Motors need a big jolt	Size for that, plus room

Match the machine to your list, plus a sensible cushion.

Choosing in Four Steps

The calm way to land on the right generator



Do these in order and the right machine almost picks itself.

Safety Features Worth Insisting On

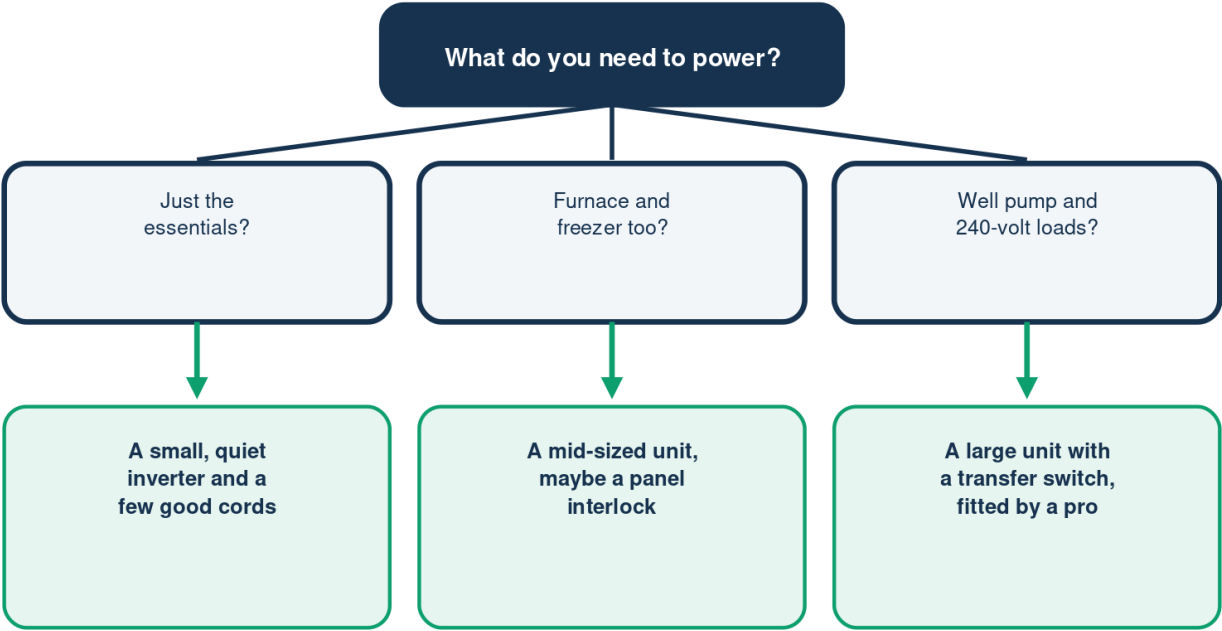
The short list that matters most

	What it does	Why it matters
CO shutoff	Kills the engine	on high CO
Low-oil shutoff	Saves the engine	from ruin
Push-button start	No hard pull-cord	to yank
Fuel gauge	See runtime	at a glance
Covered outlets	Safer in damp	weather

The CO shutoff is the one I steer every customer toward.

Which Kind Fits Your Home?

Let your must-run list point the way



On a well? Plan bigger -- the pump's surge is the deciding factor.

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



Need a Real Person?

You do not have to remember all of it.
You just have to remember you can call.
Friendly, in-home tech help -- I come to you.

BILL'S PROMISE

If you are not 100% happy with a visit, I will
make it right -- or refund it. No awkwardness,
no fine print. That is how I would want to be treated.

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

Bill@BillsHomeTech.com · Mon–Sat 9:00 AM – 7:30 PM

— Bill

Prefer help without a visit?

Bill can screen-share and fix many things remotely — a flat \$49, free for Support Plan members.



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*



Book a visit —
billshometech.com/book

Use of these guides is subject to our Terms of Use (billshometech.com/terms-of-use).

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

Bill@BillsHomeTech.com · Mon–Sat 9:00 AM – 7:30 PM

For general information only — not professional advice. Use at your own risk. For electrical, gas, water, or ladder work, please call a licensed professional. — Bill's Home Tech