



An Extended Guide · No. 1232

Routine Maintenance and Oil Changes

Simple care so it
starts when you need it

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. Maintenance is where that habit really pays off — a generator you check and exercise regularly is also one you will instinctively set up and run the safe way, outdoors and well away from the house, every single time.

Let's keep it ready for the day you need it

A generator's whole job is to work on the worst day of the year — and the only way to be sure it will is a little bit of regular, unglamorous care between outages.

I'm Bill, and I'll tell you honestly: generator maintenance isn't complicated. It's a short list of simple habits, most of them a few minutes each, done on a schedule rather than left to memory.

This guide covers that ongoing rhythm — oil, filters, the spark plug, exercising it under load, and a simple seasonal checklist you can keep taped up next to it. If you just brought yours home, start with our break-in guide first; this one picks up right after that.

★ Not sure what your model needs?

Every manual is a little different. If you'd like a hand figuring out your specific schedule, call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or bring me your manual on a visit and we'll go through it together.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, your generator will thank you for years.

- ❑ Check the oil every time, before you ask the generator to run.
- ❑ Change the oil on a schedule — commonly every 50 to 100 running hours or once a year, whichever comes first. Follow your manual.
- ❑ Clean or replace the air filter, and check the spark plug, each season or per your manual.
- ❑ Exercise the generator under some load every month or two, so it's ready and the fuel stays fresh.
- ❑ Never add oil or fuel while it's running or still hot.
- ❑ Keep an eye on the electric-start battery if you have one, and keep the recoil cord as a backup.
- ❑ A simple seasonal checklist beats trying to remember everything at once.

✓ An hour meter or a calendar reminder — pick one

Whichever you use to track service, the important thing is that you use something. Memory alone tends to let a generator go a season or two longer than it should between check-ins.

Why a few minutes a month beats an emergency scramble

The generators that let people down are almost never the ones that were well cared for.

Old fuel gumming a carburetor, oil that never got changed, a spark plug nobody looked at in years — these are the quiet, common reasons a generator won't start on the one day it's truly needed. None of them happen overnight, and none of them are hard to prevent.

The habits in this guide take a few minutes here and there, spread across the year. Compare that to trying to sort out a stubborn, neglected generator in the dark during a storm, and the math is easy.

✓ Think of it like a car

You wouldn't skip oil changes for years and expect a car to start reliably. A generator's small engine is no different — it just runs a lot less often, which makes it easier to forget.

Check the oil every time, before you ask it to work

This is the single fastest habit to build, and one of the most protective.

Before every start, take a quick look at the oil level and color using the dipstick or sight glass your manual describes. It takes less than a minute and catches problems — like a slow leak or a level that's crept down — long before they become expensive ones.

Most generators have a low-oil shutoff that stops the engine before it can run without enough oil, which is a genuine safety net. But don't lean on it as your only check; catching a low level yourself, before it ever triggers the shutoff, is always the better outcome.

! Never add oil or fuel while it's running or hot

Always shut the generator off and let it cool first. Adding oil or fuel to a running or hot engine risks burns, fire from spilled fuel on hot metal, and a mess you really don't want to clean up.

The oil change schedule

Checking the level is a quick glance; changing the oil is the deeper reset that keeps the engine healthy long-term.

Most manufacturers call for an oil change on a schedule — commonly somewhere around every 50 to 100 running hours, or once a year, whichever comes first. Your manual has the exact number for your model, so treat that as the real answer rather than a general rule of thumb.

Use the oil grade your manual specifies. A common grade for small engines is 10W-30, but grades vary by model and climate, so follow the manual rather than assuming yours matches a neighbor's or a generator you've owned before.

If you're not sure it's been tracked

When in doubt about whether a change is overdue — say, you inherited the generator or lost track for a season — it costs little to just change it. Fresh oil is cheap insurance next to a worn engine.

✓ Warm it up briefly before draining

Oil drains more completely, carrying more of those fine particles out with it, when it's slightly warm rather than cold. Just don't drain it while it's hot enough to burn you — let it cool from a run, not heat it up specially.

The air filter

A small, inexpensive part that has an outsized effect on how well the engine breathes.

The air filter keeps dust and debris out of the engine while it draws in air to burn fuel. A dirty, clogged filter chokes that airflow, which can make the generator hard to start, run rough, or use more fuel than it should.

- Check it each season, or per your manual's schedule.
- A foam-type filter is often cleaned and lightly re-oiled per the manual's instructions; a paper-type filter is usually just replaced.
- If it looks dark, clogged, or damaged, it's time to clean or replace it rather than waiting.
- A generator stored in a dusty shed or garage may need its filter checked more often than the manual's baseline.

✓ Keep a spare on hand

Air filters are small and easy to store. Keeping a spare with your other generator supplies means you're never waiting on an order when it's time to replace one.

The spark plug

A small part that does a big job — igniting the fuel that makes the whole thing run.

Check the spark plug periodically, commonly around every 100 running hours or once each season, per your manual. A healthy plug generally looks clean, with an even, light tan or gray color at the tip. One that looks heavily blackened, oily, or worn is usually due for cleaning or replacement.

A fouled spark plug is a common, simple reason a generator gets hard to start or runs unevenly — and it's an easy, inexpensive part to swap. Your manual will specify the right plug and the correct gap for your model.

✓ This pairs naturally with the air filter check

Since both are commonly checked on the same seasonal schedule, it's efficient to look at the air filter and the spark plug in the same sitting.

Exercise it — yes, really

This might be the most-skipped piece of generator maintenance, and it's one of the most important.

Running your generator under some real load every month or two, even for a short while when there's no outage at all, does two valuable things: it keeps all the moving parts lubricated and working rather than sitting idle, and it burns through fuel before that fuel has a chance to go stale and gum up the carburetor.

Think of it as a standing appointment, not an optional extra. Plug in a few real loads — the fridge, some lights, a fan — and let it run for a while, the same way you would in an actual outage. This is also a great time to practice your outdoor setup routine, so it stays second nature.

★ The number one reason generators don't start when needed

In my experience, more generators fail to start from sitting neglected than from any mechanical problem. A generator that gets exercised regularly is a generator that starts when you need it.

The hour meter, your quiet helper

If your generator has one, it's one of the most useful little features you'll never think much about.

An hour meter tracks total running time, much like an odometer in a car. It turns 'about every 50 to 100 hours' from a vague guess into an exact number you can watch for, which takes the guesswork out of scheduling oil changes and other service.

If your model doesn't have one, a simple calendar reminder or a note in a logbook each time you run it works nearly as well. The goal either way is the same: know roughly how many hours are on the engine, rather than relying on memory.

✓ Note the hours at every oil change

Writing down the hour-meter reading (or the date) every time you change the oil builds a simple service history that makes the next interval easy to spot.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

The maintenance habits are the same everywhere, but how seriously they matter can differ depending on where you live.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, outages tend to be shorter and less frequent, which paradoxically makes discipline more important — a generator that sits for months between uses needs its exercise schedule more than one that gets run often.

- Put a recurring reminder on the calendar, since a generator that's rarely needed is easy to forget entirely.
- A smaller inverter-style unit is simple to wheel out for a monthly exercise run in the driveway.
- Fuel freshness matters even more here, since the generator may sit for a long stretch between real uses.
- A neighbor's outage or a planned test is a good excuse to exercise it without waiting for an actual storm.

If you are out in the country on a well

On a well, the generator often works harder and matters more urgently, which makes falling behind on maintenance a bigger risk.

- If it's feeding a well pump, a missed oil change or a neglected air filter isn't just inconvenient — it can mean no water for the whole household.
- Longer, more frequent outages in the country mean more running hours, so the hour-based interval often arrives sooner than the once-a-year mark.
- Exercise it under a real load that includes the well pump occasionally, not just lights, so you know the whole system still works together.
- Keep spare filters, a spark plug, and oil on hand, since a rural home may be farther from a quick parts run.

★ Let's build a schedule that fits your life

Whether your generator runs once a year or every other month, I can help you set up a simple, realistic maintenance schedule you'll actually stick to. Call (330) 200-8042.

Fuel freshness between uses

A generator that's otherwise perfectly maintained can still refuse to start on old, gummed-up gasoline.

Gasoline begins to degrade within months, and stale gas can gum up a carburetor's tiny passages, which is one of the most common reasons a stored generator won't start. If you use gasoline, a fuel stabilizer added at fill-up extends its useful life meaningfully, and regularly exercising the generator (see two pages back) burns through fuel before it gets old.

Propane sidesteps this whole problem — it stores for years without going stale, which is one of the reasons folks whose generators sit unused for long stretches often lean toward it. Our fuel-storage guide covers the full details on stabilizers, rotation, and safe storage for whichever fuel you use.

✓ Match your fuel plan to how often you'll run it

A generator you exercise monthly can get by fine on gasoline with stabilizer. One that might sit untouched for a year or more leans toward propane, or a disciplined habit of running the tank low and refilling fresh.

The electric-start battery

If your generator has push-button or electric start, there's a small battery behind that convenience that needs its own bit of care.

Like any small battery left sitting, it can lose its charge over time, especially over a long winter of disuse. Check your manual for how it recommends keeping the battery topped up — some generators trickle-charge it whenever the unit is plugged into household power; others need the battery checked or charged periodically by hand.

- Check the battery each season, especially before a season where you're likely to need the generator.
- Keep the recoil (pull-cord) backup in good working order too, in case the battery is ever low when you need to start it.
- A battery that won't hold a charge anymore is a simple, inexpensive part to replace — don't let it become the reason a good generator won't start.
- Cold weather is hardest on batteries, so a check before winter is especially worthwhile.

✓ Exercising the generator helps the battery too

Running the generator regularly keeps an electric-start battery in use and charged, rather than sitting idle and slowly losing its charge — one more reason that monthly exercise routine pays off.

Never add oil or fuel while it's running or hot

This is worth its own page, because it's a genuinely dangerous shortcut that's tempting to take when you're in a hurry.

Spilled fuel on a hot engine or muffler can ignite, and touching hot engine parts while checking or adding oil risks a real burn. It only takes a minute to shut the generator off and let it cool before doing either — there's no version of 'just a quick top-off while it's running' that's actually worth the risk.

Get in the habit of planning ahead instead: check oil and fuel levels before you start a run, so you're not tempted to add either mid-task. If you do need to refuel partway through a long outage, shut it down, let it cool, refuel outdoors away from any flame or spark, wipe up any spills, and only then restart it.

! Give it time to cool, every time

A generator's muffler and engine stay hot well after you shut it off. Give it several minutes of cooling time before you touch it for oil or fuel, no matter how much of a hurry you're in.

A simple seasonal checklist

Keep this table taped up near the generator, or tucked in with the manual, as your at-a-glance reminder.

Task	How Often
Check the oil level and color	Every time, before starting
Change the oil	Every 50-100 hours or annually — follow the manual
Clean or replace the air filter	Each season, or per the manual
Check the spark plug	Each season, or per the manual
Exercise it under a real load	Monthly or every couple of months
Check the electric-start battery	Each season, especially before winter
Check fuel freshness, add stabilizer	At every fill, or per the fuel-storage guide

✓ **Post it, don't just file it**

A checklist that lives in a drawer doesn't get followed. Tape a copy to the generator itself, or somewhere you'll see it when you walk past.

Signs it's time for a closer look

Most maintenance is routine and preventive, but it helps to know what a generator asking for attention looks and sounds like.

Hard starting, rough or uneven running, unusual smoke color, a new noise, or oil that looks unusually dark or gritty are all worth paying attention to. Often the cause is something on this guide's list — an overdue oil change, a clogged filter, a tired spark plug, or stale fuel.

- Hard to start, especially cold: check fuel freshness, the choke, and the spark plug.
- Running rough or surging: often the air filter or spark plug.
- Noticeably more smoke than usual: worth stopping to investigate rather than continuing to run it.
- A new rattle, knock, or unusual vibration: stop and have it looked at rather than pushing through.

✓ A small-engine shop is a good resource

For anything beyond this guide's basics — an internal repair, a persistent issue you can't trace to fuel, filter, or plug — a local small-engine shop is the right call. There's no shame in bringing in a pro for that kind of work.

Keeping records simple

You don't need anything elaborate — just somewhere consistent to jot down what you did and when.

A small notebook kept with the generator, a note on your phone, or even a card taped inside the fuel-cap cover all work. The point isn't the format; it's having an honest record you can trust instead of guessing whether it's 'been a while.'

- Date and hour-meter reading (or approximate hours) at each oil change.
- Date the air filter and spark plug were last checked or replaced.
- Date fuel was last added or stabilized.
- Any hiccups and how they were resolved, so you're not solving the same mystery twice.

✓ Start the log now, even mid-life

If your generator's been running for a while without a record, don't worry about the gap — just start logging from today. A record that starts now is far more useful than no record at all.

Common maintenance mistakes

A short list of the habits that quietly lead to a generator that won't start when it's needed most.

- **Letting fuel sit for a year or more** without stabilizer or a rotation plan.
- **Skipping the exercise runs** because 'it hasn't been needed lately.'
- **Guessing at the oil grade or interval** instead of checking the manual.
- **Ignoring a low-oil shutoff** as a nuisance rather than the warning it is.
- **Putting off the air filter and spark plug** because the generator 'still seems to run fine.'

! Neglect is quiet until it isn't

A poorly maintained generator often runs just fine right up until the moment you actually need it under real load, in bad weather, after sitting unused. That's exactly the wrong day to find out.

Storage between uses

Maintenance and storage go hand in hand — how you put the generator away shapes how ready it is next time.

Between uses, a generator wants a dry, ventilated spot out of the weather, fuel handled properly (stabilized or run out, per your plan), and the battery, if it has one, checked before a long stretch of disuse. Our generator storage guide covers this in full, including the choice between stabilizing fuel and running the tank dry for longer stops.

Think of storage as simply where the maintenance habits in this guide pause, not where they stop. A quick check when you put it away and another when you bring it back out keeps the two working together.

✓ Check it once mid-storage too

If your generator will sit for months, a quick mid-season peek — battery, for leaks, general condition — catches small issues before they become a surprise at the next real use.

Tying it back to day one

Everything in this guide builds on the habits you started the very first day you owned the generator.

If you haven't yet, our break-in guide walks through that first day in detail — the initial oil fill, the first start, and the early break-in oil change that clears out the fine metal particles from those first few hours. That first change is really just the earliest entry in the same maintenance rhythm this guide covers for the rest of the generator's life.

The habits don't really change as the generator ages, they just repeat: check, exercise, change, and keep a record. A generator cared for this way tends to outlast the ones that only get attention when something's already gone wrong.

✓ New to this generator, not just new in the box?

If you inherited or bought a used generator without knowing its full history, treat the first oil change, filter, and spark plug check as your own version of a break-in — a clean starting point for the record you keep from here on.

Before every start — a quick check

A short habit to run through every single time, whether it's a monthly exercise run or a real outage.

- ☐ Oil level looks right on the dipstick or sight glass.
- ☐ Fuel is fresh, or at least not obviously old and questionable.
- ☐ Air filter looks clean, not clogged or dark.
- ☐ The area around and above the generator is clear.
- ☐ It's set up outdoors, 20+ feet from the house, exhaust pointed away.
- ☐ Carbon-monoxide alarms inside the house are working.
- ☐ Nothing is plugged in yet for the very first moment of starting.

★ Make this second nature

The more often you run through this quick check, the less you'll even have to think about it. If you'd like help building the habit, I'm glad to walk through it with you on a visit. Call (330) 200-8042.

Common Questions

The maintenance questions I hear most often, answered plainly.

Q: How often do I really need to change the oil?

Follow your manual's number — commonly somewhere around every 50 to 100 running hours, or once a year, whichever comes first. When in doubt, err on the side of changing it sooner.

Q: What happens if I skip exercising it for a long stretch?

The fuel is more likely to go stale, and the engine and seals can suffer from long periods of sitting idle. It's one of the most common reasons a generator won't start when it's finally needed.

Q: Can I just top off the oil instead of fully changing it?

Topping off is fine between changes if the level has dropped a bit, but it doesn't replace a full change on schedule — old oil loses its protective properties even if the level looks fine.

Q: Do I need to do anything special before winter?

Check the battery if you have electric start, use the manual's cold-weather oil recommendation if it has one, and make sure fuel is fresh heading into the season you're most likely to need it.

Q: Is it really dangerous to add fuel while it's still warm?

Yes — spilled fuel on a hot engine or muffler can ignite. Always let it cool first, even if that means waiting a few extra minutes mid-task.

★ Maintenance questions are always welcome

There's no such thing as a silly maintenance question — I'd much rather you call and ask than skip a step and find out the hard way. Reach 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 staying on top of generator maintenance 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

The Maintenance Rhythm

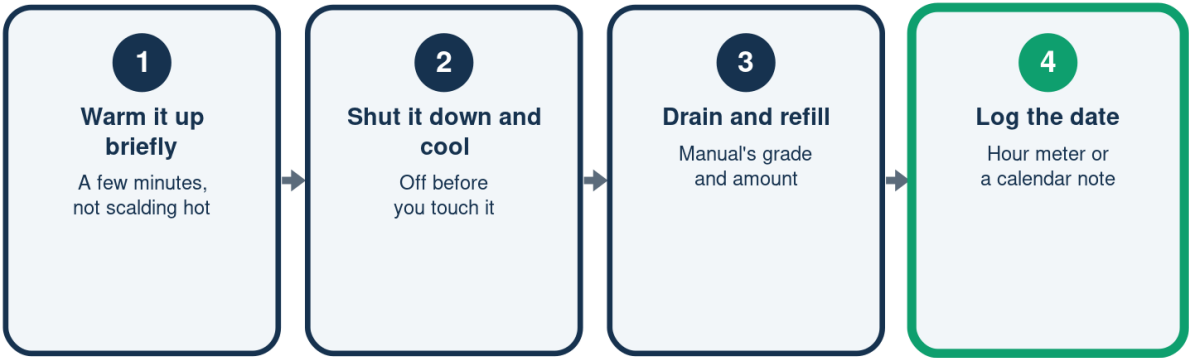
A few habits, repeated on schedule

	How Often	What To Do
Every time	Check oil,	clear the area
Each season	Air filter,	spark plug
Every 50-100 hrs	Change the	oil
Monthly or so	Exercise it	under load

Follow your manual for the exact numbers on your model.

A Simple Oil-Change Routine

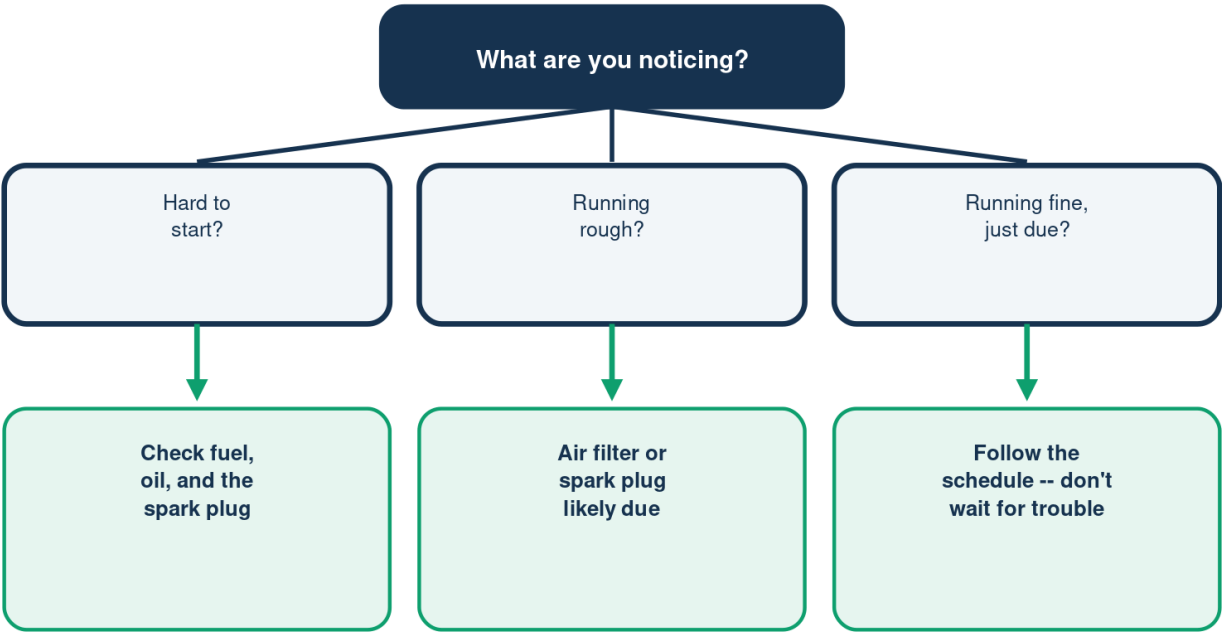
The same four steps, every time



Four simple steps, repeated on schedule.

Does It Need Attention Now?

Match what you're noticing to the likely fix



Anything beyond these basics is a good job for a small-engine shop.

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

Seasonal Care at a Glance

A quarterly rhythm worth keeping

	Focus	Why
Spring	Fresh fuel,	wake it up
Summer	Exercise it,	check battery
Fall	Filter and plug,	storm-ready
Winter	Cold-weather oil,	keep it dry

Four seasons, four quick check-ins -- nothing complicated.



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