



An Extended Guide · No. 1281

Propane Tanks & Cylinders: Sizes, Refills & Runtime

Sizes, refills, and
real-world runtime

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! Before you begin — a quick safety note.

This guide covers work involving propane, 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 propane supplier. 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

Two questions land on my phone more than almost any other: what size propane tank should I get, and how long will it run my generator? Let's take them both slowly.

There's no single number I can hand you for “runtime” — anyone who gives you one without knowing your generator and your load is guessing. What I can give you is the honest relationship behind it, plus a clear-eyed look at tank sizes and how to keep fresh propane on hand.

What you'll get out of this guide

- The common tank and cylinder sizes, in plain terms
- Refilling versus exchanging, and when each makes sense
- The real relationship between tank size, your load, and runtime
- How often cylinders need inspecting and requalifying
- Town and country notes on keeping propane on hand

★ Not sure where to start?

Tell me what you're trying to run and for how long, and I'll help you land on a tank setup that actually fits — no guessing required. (330) 200-8042.

Tanks, Refills & Runtime, in One Page

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

- ❑ Common sizes run from small 20-lb cylinders (grill-tank size) up to 100-lb cylinders and big yard tanks.
- ❑ Refilling keeps your own tank; exchanging swaps it for a filled one elsewhere — both are fine, just different trade-offs.
- ❑ Runtime depends on two things together: how much fuel is in the tank, and how hard you're running the generator.
- ❑ A bigger tank and a lighter load both stretch your runtime; a smaller tank and a heavy load both shrink it.
- ❑ Cylinders need periodic inspection and requalification on a schedule — don't keep using one that's rusted, dented, or out of date.

✓ Test your own setup once

The most useful runtime number isn't in any chart — it's the one you get from timing your own generator under your own typical load.

The Common Sizes, Plainly

Most households land on one of a few general sizes. Here's what each is like to live with.

Size	What it's like
20-lb cylinder	The familiar upright tank used for a gas grill — easy to carry, easy to exchange or refill.
100-lb cylinder	A larger upright cylinder holding several times the fuel of a 20-lb tank — still portable with a hand truck, but meant to stay mostly in place.
Big yard tank	A large, semi-permanent tank, sometimes buried or partly buried, installed on the property — often already used for home heat or cooking.

None of these is the “right” size on its own — it's about matching the tank to how you'll actually use your generator.

✓ **Start with what you already have**

If your home already has a yard tank for heat, that's often the simplest generator fuel source too — ask your propane supplier about tapping into it.

Which Size Fits Which Life

A little honesty about who each size actually suits.

- **Occasional, shorter outages:** a couple of 20-lb cylinders, swapped as needed, is plenty for most town and suburban households.
- **Frequent or longer outages:** a 100-lb cylinder means fewer swaps and steadier performance through a multi-day event.
- **Well pumps, whole-home backup, or already heating with propane:** a big yard tank is usually the natural fit, and often already in place.

It's perfectly fine to grow into a bigger setup over time — plenty of folks start with a couple of cylinders and add a yard tank later once they know how they actually use their generator.

★ There's no shame in starting small

A couple of cylinders is a completely reasonable starting point. You can always size up once you know your real habits.

Refill or Exchange? The Two Ways to Get More Propane

When a tank runs low, you've got two honest options — and neither one is the “right” answer for everyone.

Way	How it works
Exchange	Swap your empty cylinder for a filled one at a store, hardware retailer, or exchange cage. Fast and simple — you just don't know the exact history of the tank you're getting.
Refill	Bring your own cylinder to a propane supplier or filling station and have it refilled. You keep the same tank, and many suppliers will glance it over while they fill it.

Exchanging is the quicker errand; refilling means you keep the tank you know. Plenty of folks use both depending on what's convenient that day — there's no wrong choice here.

✓ **Either way, check the tank**

Whichever you choose, take a look at the cylinder for rust, dents, or a badly worn valve before it goes back into service. A supplier can help you judge if you're unsure.

The Big Idea: Runtime = Fuel Amount vs. How Hard You Run It

If you remember one thing from this whole guide, make it this.

How long a tank lasts isn't just about its size — it's a balance between two things: how much fuel is actually in the tank, and how much your generator is asking that fuel to do. A big tank running a light load stretches a long way. A small tank running a heavy load empties fast. Change either side, and the runtime changes with it.

- **More fuel** — a bigger tank, or a fuller one — always means more runtime, all else being equal.
- **Less load** — running fewer things, or smaller things, at once — always stretches that fuel further.
- The two work together, which is exactly why nobody can honestly hand you a single “this tank runs for X hours” number without knowing both sides.

★ This is the conversation I have most

When someone asks me how long their tank will last, my first question is always “running what?” Once I know your load, we can actually talk sensibly about runtime.

Why This Guide Won't Give You an Hours Number

You may have noticed this guide hasn't printed a single “X hours per tank” figure. That's on purpose.

Runtime depends on your specific generator's fuel-consumption rate, your tank size, and exactly what you're running — three things that are different in nearly every household. A number that sounds official but was written for a different generator and a different load isn't actually useful to you; it might even give you false confidence.

- Your generator's manual or spec plate often lists an approximate fuel-consumption rate — that's the real starting point for your setup.
- From there, tank size and your typical load are the other two pieces of the puzzle.
- If you can't find your generator's numbers, the manufacturer's support line or your manual beats guessing from something you read online.

! Be skeptical of confident-sounding numbers

If a chart or a salesperson gives you a precise runtime without ever asking what generator you have or what you'll be running, take it with a grain of salt.

A Simple Way to Estimate Your Own Runtime

You don't need a formula to get a feel for your own setup — you just need to pay attention once or twice.

- Run your generator with your normal essentials plugged in — the load you'd actually use in an outage.
- Note the time you started, and check back periodically to see how the tank gauge (or its weight) is dropping.
- After a run or two, you'll have a real, honest sense of how long **your** tank, at **your** load, actually lasts — far more useful than any generic number.

Jot the result somewhere you'll find it again — the inside cover of this guide, or taped to the generator itself.

✓ Test before you need to know

A calm weekend test run is a much better time to learn this than the middle of a real outage.

Tanks & Cylinders in Town or the Suburbs

Town outages tend to be shorter, which usually means you don't need a huge tank setup to feel comfortable.

What usually matters most here

- **A couple of 20-lb cylinders** is a comfortable starting point for most households — one in use, one full in reserve.
- **Exchange stations are everywhere in town**, which makes the exchange option especially convenient if you'd rather not deal with refilling.
- **Storage space is often tighter**, so a couple of manageable cylinders tucked outdoors usually beats a large yard tank for a typical in-town lot.
- **Shorter outages mean less fuel needed overall** — most town scenarios are measured in hours to a day or two, not a week.

A common town setup is two or three 20-lb cylinders, rotated between exchange and refill depending on what's easiest that week.

✓ Renting or sharing walls?

A generator usually isn't practical in an apartment or condo, which means large propane storage isn't either. A battery power station is often the better fit — happy to help you weigh that.

Tanks & Cylinders on a Well or in the Country

Out in the country, both the outages and the stakes tend to be bigger — especially when a well pump is depending on the fuel you have on hand.

What usually matters most here

- **A 100-lb cylinder or a yard tank fits better than small cylinders** once you're backing up a well pump — fewer swaps, steadier supply through a long outage.
- **The well pump's starting surge doesn't wait for a tank swap.** Running low mid-outage means the pump — and your water — stops until you catch up.
- **Many rural homes already have a yard tank** for heat or cooking; tapping into it the safe, professional way is often simpler than managing several cylinders.
- **Longer outages mean more total fuel needed**, so the runtime relationship matters even more here — a bigger tank genuinely buys you real peace of mind.

A typical country setup pairs a 100-lb cylinder or two, or a connection to an existing yard tank, sized with the well pump's needs and a realistic outage length in mind.

★ Water is the thing you miss first

Sizing the tank around your well pump's real needs — not a guess — is exactly the kind of planning I help rural customers with. Let's make sure you never watch a gauge drop while the well is depending on it.

Keeping Spare Cylinders on Hand

For most households, the simplest strategy isn't one giant tank — it's a couple of spares in reserve.

- A second full cylinder means a dead tank is a five-minute swap, not a scramble.
- For longer outages, a third cylinder in reserve is cheap insurance.
- Rotate spares occasionally into everyday use — a grill, a patio heater — so a cylinder doesn't sit completely untouched for years, though propane itself doesn't go stale.

How many spares makes sense depends on your household's typical outage length and how much you're running — there's no universal right number, just a comfortable margin.

✓ Label the fill or swap date

A strip of tape with the date on each cylinder makes it easy to know which one to grab first, and when it's due another look.

The Big Yard Tank Option

For households that lean on propane heavily — or already have one for heat — a larger yard tank changes the whole equation.

- A yard tank holds far more fuel than any number of cylinders, which means far less swapping during a long outage.
- Many are owned outright or leased through a propane supplier — either way, sizing and installing one is a conversation with that supplier.
- Tapping a generator into an existing yard tank the safe, professional way is common for rural households and for anyone who already heats with propane.

There's a whole guide in this series on the hookup hardware itself — hoses, regulators, and connections — if a yard tank is part of your plan.

★ A great conversation to have early

If you're already budgeting for a generator, it's worth asking your propane supplier about tank size at the same time — sizing both together usually saves a step later.

The Rule That Matters No Matter the Tank

However much propane you have on hand, where the generator runs never changes.

A running generator's exhaust contains **carbon monoxide**, an invisible, odorless gas that can kill. Breathing enough of it can make you pass out — or worse — before you realize anything's wrong. It takes roughly a hundred lives a year, almost always in situations that were preventable.

- Run the generator **outdoors only**, at least **20 feet** from the house, exhaust pointed away from doors, windows, and vents.
- **Never** run it in a garage, basement, shed, or carport, even briefly, even with the door open.
- Put **battery-backup CO alarms** on every level of the house and near bedrooms, and test them.
- If an alarm sounds, or anyone feels dizzy or sick, get outside into fresh air and call 911.

! A full tank doesn't change the rule

It's tempting to think a well-stocked setup means you can be a little more relaxed about placement. The CO rule doesn't bend for a bigger tank.

Safe Propane Storage, in Brief

Storage itself is its own topic, but a couple of basics are worth repeating here.

- Cylinders and tanks live **outdoors**, standing upright for cylinders, away from heat sources — never in the house, garage, or a hot car.
- Propane doesn't go stale sitting in a tank, which is a big part of why it's such a popular backup fuel.

There's a whole guide in this series devoted to fuel storage and shelf life across every fuel type, including a closer look at rotation habits for gasoline. This page is just the propane-specific reminder.

! If you ever smell rotten eggs

That smell is added to propane on purpose so a leak gets noticed. If you smell it, don't flip switches or light anything — get away from the area and call your propane supplier or 911.

Requalification & Inspection: The Annual Habit

Cylinders don't last forever, and a quick yearly look keeps you ahead of any trouble.

- Give every cylinder a once-a-year once-over: check for rust, dents, a damaged valve, or a worn foot ring.
- In the US, portable cylinders generally need **requalification** around 12 years from manufacture, and periodically after that — the date is stamped on the collar.
- A cylinder that's rusted, dented, or past its requalification date should be retired, not refilled — a supplier can requalify it or swap it for you.

This is one of the easiest habits in this whole guide: a five-minute look, once a year, usually alongside a refill or an exchange.

✓ Let your supplier be the judge

If you're ever unsure whether a cylinder still looks right, most propane suppliers will happily take a quick look before they fill it.

Reading a Cylinder's Markings

You don't need to be an expert reader of tank stamps — just know what to look for.

- Look for a stamped date on the collar near the valve — that's your reference point for requalification.
- Manufacturer and capacity markings are usually stamped nearby too.
- If the markings are worn, illegible, or you're simply unsure what you're looking at, ask your propane supplier — they read these every day.

When in doubt, it costs nothing to ask before you fill or exchange a tank you're not sure about.

✓ New to reading tank stamps?

Take a photo of the collar next time you're at a supplier and ask them to walk you through what you're looking at. Two minutes, and you'll know for good.

Exchange Cages & Refill Stations: What to Expect

Both are simple, everyday errands once you know the routine.

- **Exchange cages** — the locked racks you see outside hardware and grocery stores — work on a straightforward swap: your empty for one of their full ones.
- **Refill stations**, often at a propane supplier or some hardware stores, fill the cylinder you already own, usually while you wait or during a quick stop.
- Bring the cylinder itself, not just a memory of its size — staff typically weigh or inspect it as part of the process.

Either errand takes just a few minutes once you've done it a time or two.

✓ Keep a small tote in the car

A tote or an old towel to protect your trunk from a slightly greasy valve makes the whole errand tidier.

Connecting What You Buy to Your Generator

Once you've got a full tank in hand, actually hooking it up is its own short topic.

At a high level: the cylinder valve stays closed until the hose is connected, you check the connection with a little soapy water, and only then do you open the valve. There's a full guide in this series devoted entirely to that hookup — hoses, regulators, and the fittings involved — if you'd like the complete walk-through.

✓ **This page is about the tank, not the hookup**

If you're setting up a propane connection for the first time, that dedicated hookup guide is the one to read next.

A Simple Tank Habit Worth Building

A handful of small habits, kept up consistently, are what actually make propane trouble-free.

- ❑ Keep at least one full spare cylinder on hand at all times.
- ❑ Refill or exchange before a tank runs all the way down, not after.
- ❑ Give every cylinder a quick yearly look for rust, dents, or a damaged valve.
- ❑ Know your cylinders' requalification dates, stamped on the collar.
- ❑ Do a real test run occasionally so you have an honest sense of your own runtime.

✓ Little habits, big payoff

None of this takes more than a few minutes a season, and it's the difference between a generator that's actually ready and one that only seems that way.

When to Give Me a Call

Most of this you can manage yourself — but a few parts are worth handing off.

- Sorting out what tank size actually fits your household and your generator.
- Sizing a generator and a tank together for a well pump or other big load.
- Connecting to a yard tank for the first time.
- A cylinder you're unsure passes inspection, or a requalification date you can't read.
- A yearly check-up that includes a look at your whole propane setup.

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Everyday Cheat Sheet

Dog-ear this page. It's the fast answer to what comes up most with tanks and cylinders.

I want to...	Remember this
Pick a size	20-lb for light, occasional use; 100-lb or a yard tank for heavier or longer needs
Get more propane	Exchange for speed; refill to keep your own tank
Understand runtime	It's tank size AND load together — not a fixed number
Find my real runtime	Test your generator with your normal load and time it yourself
Stay ahead of expiry	Check the collar date; requalify roughly every 12 years
Store it safely	Outdoors, upright, away from heat — never indoors
Get help	Call Bill: (330) 200-8042

Words People Use

A few tank-and-cylinder terms, in everyday language.

Q: Cylinder

A portable propane tank — commonly 20-lb (grill size) or 100-lb.

Q: Yard tank

A large, semi-permanent propane tank installed on a property, sometimes buried or partly buried.

Q: Exchange

Swapping an empty cylinder for a filled one at a store or cage, rather than refilling your own.

Q: Refill

Having your own cylinder filled at a propane supplier or filling station.

Q: Requalification

The periodic re-certification a propane cylinder needs, starting around 12 years from manufacture, stamped on the collar.

Q: Runtime

How long a tank of fuel lasts under a given load — it depends on both the tank's size and how hard the generator is working.

Q: Carbon monoxide (CO)

The invisible, odorless gas in engine exhaust that can kill. The reason a generator must always run far outdoors.

What Decides Your Runtime

Two things, working together

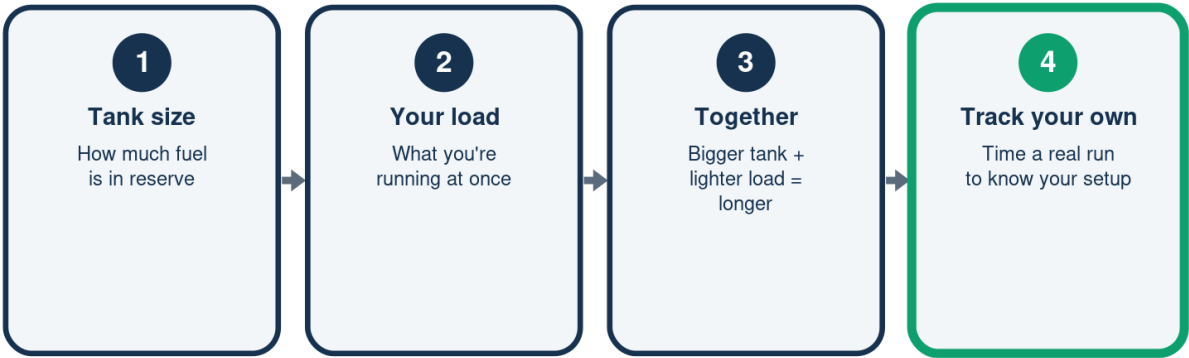


Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

Common Propane Sizes at a Glance

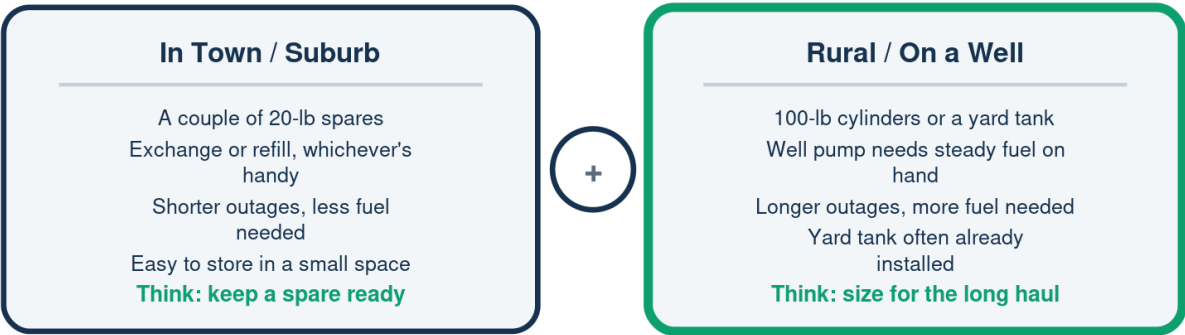
A general guide — check what fits your home

	20-lb cylinder	100-lb cylinder	Yard tank
Think of it as	Grill-tank size	Several 20-lb tanks	A big propane pool
Good for	Quick swaps	Fewer swaps	Long stretches
Where it lives	By the generator	By the generator	Installed in the yard

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

Town Tank Strategy vs. Country

Same propane, different scale

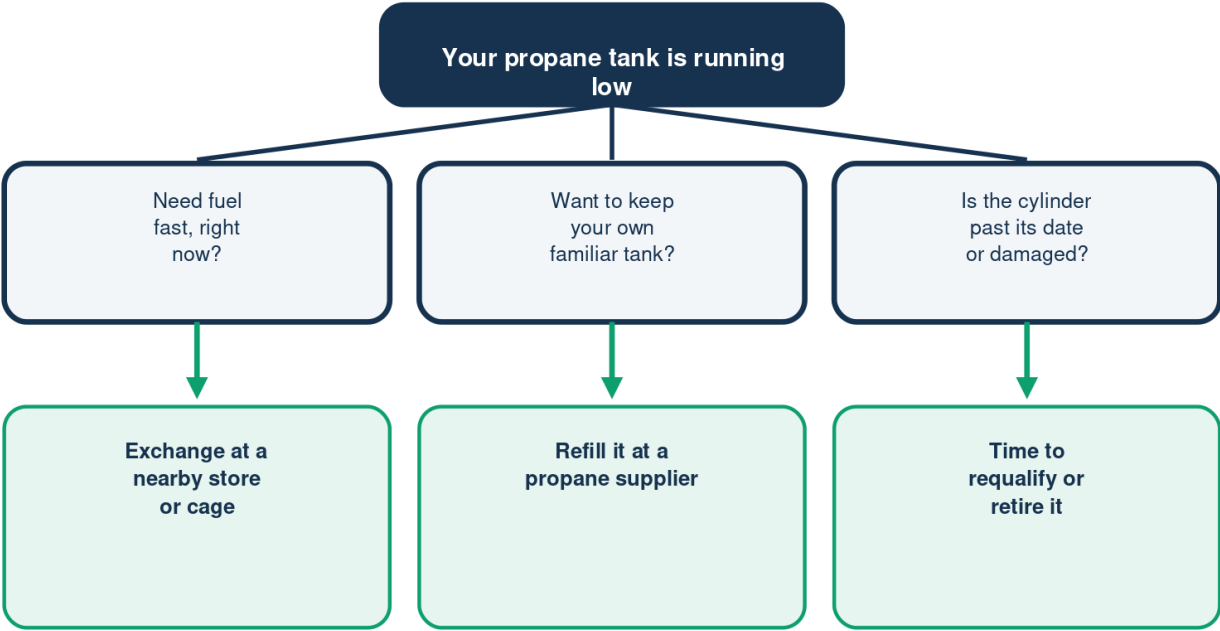


Same idea — different quantities

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

Refill or Exchange — Which Tonight?

Three quick questions when a tank runs low



Never keep using a cylinder that's rusted, dented, or past its requalification date.

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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