



An Extended Guide · No. 1306

Standby vs. Portable Generator

Which kind of backup
is right for you?

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 still the real danger

A standby generator runs on an engine, and engine exhaust contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that can kill. Your installer sets the unit outdoors and spaces it away from windows, doors, and vents to meet the maker's instructions and local code, which is a big part of what keeps you safe. Your job is to keep it that way: never let anyone box it in, build a structure around it, or let snow, leaves, or drifts pile up against it, and never move it closer to the house. Put battery-backup carbon-monoxide alarms on every floor and outside the bedrooms, and test them — the safety agencies urge this for every home. If an alarm sounds, or anyone feels dizzy, sick, or sleepy, get everyone into fresh air first and ask questions later. A portable generator carries the exact same carbon-monoxide danger, but in a less forgiving form — you site it and run it by hand every time — so this is one real point in a standby's favor, and our portable-generator guides cover the portable side of it in full.

Let's compare them honestly

A standby and a portable generator do the same basic job — keep your home powered when the utility fails — but they go about it in completely different ways, at very different costs. This guide lays them side by side so you can choose with confidence.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. I've spent 30+ years helping folks weigh choices like this one, patiently and in plain language. Think of this guide as me at your kitchen table, helping you figure out which kind actually fits your home — not which one costs more.

Here's my promise up front: I don't sell either kind, and I earn no commission, so I've got no reason to steer you. Sometimes the right answer is a standby; sometimes it's a portable that saves you a great deal of money. We'll find your answer, not mine.

★ There's nothing to sell you here

If you'd like a second opinion before you spend a dollar, call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and we'll talk through which kind suits you — free, and with nothing to sell.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, you already understand the choice.

- ❑ A standby is permanent and automatic — it starts itself and can power your whole home, even when you're away.
- ❑ A portable costs far less, but you wheel it out, start it, and refuel it by hand — and someone has to be home to do it.
- ❑ A standby needs a professional install and a permit; a portable can run a few things on cords, or wired circuits through an electrician-fitted hookup.
- ❑ Decide on how often and how long your power goes out, whether you're on a well, your health, your travel, your strength, and your budget.
- ❑ Neither is 'better' — for some homes a portable is the smarter money, and I'll happily tell you when that's you.
- ❑ For the portable side in depth, lean on our portable-generator guides; this one is about choosing between the two.

✓ The one-sentence version

Pick a standby when you want hands-free, whole-home power you can count on while away; pick a portable when a lower price and a few powered essentials are the better fit.

Meet the two kinds

Before we compare, let's be clear about what each one actually is, in plain terms.

The whole-home standby

A permanent machine that lives outside on a pad, wired into your home and connected to natural gas or a propane tank. It watches your power and, on an outage, starts and switches your home over by itself — no cords, no gasoline, no going outside. Our standby basics guide covers it in full.

The portable

A machine you store in the garage or shed and roll outside when you need it. You start it, keep it fueled with gasoline or propane by hand, and either run cords to a few things or feed wired circuits through a hookup an electrician installs. It costs far less, but it asks something of you every time. Our portable-generator guides cover it in full.

✓ Same goal, different bargain

Both keep your home livable in an outage. The standby buys you hands-off convenience for a higher price; the portable saves money in exchange for your time and effort. The rest is detail.

The big difference: automatic versus by hand

If you take away one thing, let it be this — it's the difference everything else flows from.

A standby is automatic. Its transfer switch senses the outage, starts the generator, and powers your home within seconds, whether you're asleep, at work, or three states away. When the utility returns, it switches back and shuts down on its own. You do nothing.

A portable is hands-on, every single time. Someone has to be home, notice the outage, roll the machine out, start it, connect it, and keep it fueled — often in the dark, in bad weather, at the worst possible moment. For some folks that's no trouble; for others it's the whole reason they want a standby.

★ Be honest about that 3 a.m. storm

Picture the power going out on a cold, wet night. Would you rather it simply handle itself, or be out there in a bathrobe with a flashlight? Your honest answer tells you a lot. Call (330) 200-8042 if you want to talk it through.

How much of your home each one covers

The two kinds also differ in how much they can keep running at once.

A standby can be sized to run your whole house — heat, water, air conditioning, the works — or a generous set of essential circuits, with the size settled by a proper load calculation. Our sizing guide walks through that decision.

A portable covers less. A smaller one runs a few things on cords — the fridge, some lights, a space heater. A larger one, fed through an electrician-installed hookup, can power wired circuits like the furnace or well pump, though usually a chosen few at a time rather than everything at once.

✓ Whole home versus the essentials

If your goal is to keep the entire house comfortable without thinking about it, that points to a standby. If keeping a few key things going is enough, a portable may cover it for far less.

Fuel: hands-off versus by hand

How each machine gets its fuel is a bigger day-to-day difference than folks expect.

A standby draws from a permanent supply — natural gas piped to the house, or a propane tank on the property. With natural gas there's usually nothing to refill at all; with propane you simply keep the tank topped up. You never carry fuel to it during an outage.

A portable runs on gasoline or propane you supply and refill by hand. That means storing fuel safely, keeping it fresh, and refilling the machine — carefully, after letting it cool — through a long outage. In a widespread emergency, fuel can also be hard to find just when you need it. Our portable-generator guides cover fuel and safe storage in detail.

✓ The long-outage difference

For a short blip, refueling a portable is no big deal. For a multi-day outage, a standby's steady, hands-off fuel supply is where it really earns its keep.

Effort, strength, and getting older

This page is a candid one, especially for those of us who aren't as strong as we once were.

A portable is a physical machine. You have to wheel it out — and the bigger ones are heavy — start it, sometimes with a pull cord, and handle fuel cans. On a bad knee, a sore shoulder, or a frosty morning, that can go from minor chore to real obstacle.

A standby asks none of that. It sits outside and does the work itself, which is a big part of why so many folks switch to one as the years go by. If wrestling a portable out in a storm simply isn't realistic for you anymore, that's not a small thing — it's one of the best reasons to consider a standby.

★ Match the machine to the person

There's no shame in admitting a portable is more than you want to handle. Getting the right fit for your body and your life is exactly what I help with. Call (330) 200-8042.

What happens when you're not home

Here's a difference that catches people off guard: a portable only helps if someone's there to run it.

A standby doesn't care whether you're home. It starts and powers the house on its own, so you can be at work, on vacation, or away for the winter and still come back to a warm house, safe food, and a dry basement. Many units can even text your phone that they've kicked on.

A portable sits idle unless someone able-bodied is home to set it up. If you travel, spend part of the year elsewhere, or simply aren't always around, that's a real gap — the outage that freezes your pipes or spoils your freezer is often the one that happens while you're gone.

✓ Think about your empty-house hours

If your home is regularly empty — workdays, trips, a second home — a standby's ability to run without you is one of its strongest advantages.

What they cost, honestly

I won't quote you dollar figures — they vary too much to be honest — but I can be very clear about the shape of it.

A portable is far cheaper to buy, and cheaper still if you only run things on cords. A standby is a bigger investment, because the number includes the unit, the transfer switch, the electrical and gas work, a pad, and a permit — a whole coordinated install, not just a machine.

But cost isn't only the sticker. Weigh a portable's fuel, cords, and your time against a standby's hands-off, whole-home coverage that works while you're away. Our cost-and-value guide lays out the standby side fairly, and our portable-generator guides do the same for portables.

★ Cheaper up front isn't always cheaper overall

Sometimes a portable is genuinely the smarter money; sometimes a standby pays you back in spoiled-food, frozen-pipe, and peace-of-mind terms. I'll help you weigh it for your home, with no dog in the fight. Call (330) 200-8042.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Which kind of generator wins often comes down to where you live — a tidy in-town lot leans one way, a rural place on a well leans another.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, outages are often shorter, and your water keeps flowing from the city main no matter what. That means a portable running a few essentials can be plenty — unless hands-free convenience or being away a lot tips you toward a standby.

- City water keeps running in an outage, so backup is about food, warmth, and comfort — often a portable's wheelhouse.
- Shorter, less frequent outages make a portable's hands-on routine easier to live with.
- If you travel or the house is often empty, a standby's run-while-away ability still earns its cost.
- Close neighbors and small lots make a standby's placement and setbacks worth planning — see our noise-and-neighbors guide.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country the math shifts hard toward a standby. When the power quits, your well pump quits too — no water for drinking, cooking, flushing, or animals — and rural outages tend to run longer.

- A standby starts the well pump automatically, keeping water flowing — the single biggest reason rural folks choose one.
- Longer outages make hands-off, steady fuel a real advantage over refueling a portable for days.
- A portable can start a well pump through a proper hookup, but only if you're home and able to run it — our well-pump guide compares both.
- More land eases a standby's placement, though gas and electrical runs can be longer.

★ Not sure which camp you're in?

Plenty of homes sit in the middle — a suburban lot with frequent storms, or a well with city-short outages. Tell me your setup and I'll help you weigh it. Call (330) 200-8042.

The well-water question

If you're on a private well, this one factor often settles the whole debate — so it deserves its own page.

On a well, no electricity means no water at all: nothing for drinking, cooking, flushing, or the animals. That raises the stakes of every outage, and it's why rural homes lean so heavily toward automatic backup.

A standby, sized to start the well pump, keeps water flowing on its own — even at 3 a.m., even when you're away. A portable can run a well pump too, but only through an electrician-installed hookup and only when you're home and able to fire it up. Our well-pump guide walks through both paths and the pump's big starting surge.

✓ The pump usually decides the size

A well pump's large starting surge is often the biggest single load in a rural home, so it tends to drive the whole decision — which our well-pump and sizing guides cover in plain English.

If someone at home relies on powered equipment

When health depends on electricity, the choice takes on real weight — so let's handle it with care.

A standby's automatic, steady power is a genuine comfort for equipment like a CPAP, an oxygen concentrator, or a powered chair — it comes on within seconds, on its own, even overnight or while you're out. A portable can power such things too, but only once someone starts it, which may be too slow when it matters most.

Either way, a generator is one strong layer, not the whole plan. Keep the manufacturer-approved battery backups, register with your utility's medical priority list, and talk with your equipment supplier and doctor. Our medical-equipment guide covers building that fuller plan.

! A generator is a layer, never the only plan

If powered medical equipment ever fails and its backup runs low — or if someone has trouble breathing, chest pain, confusion, or blue lips — call 911. No generator replaces a medical emergency plan.

The safety differences worth knowing

Both machines run on engines, so both demand respect — but they hand you very different safety jobs.

A standby is professionally sited outdoors, at the maker's and code's distances from windows and doors, and its transfer switch physically keeps generator power and utility power from ever meeting — the electrical code, NEC 702.5, requires exactly that, so there's no dangerous backfeed onto the lines. Much of its safety is built in and done for you.

A portable puts those jobs in your hands each time: place it far enough from the house so exhaust can't drift in, never run it in a garage, feed the house only through a proper transfer switch or interlock — never a double-ended 'suicide cord' — and handle fuel with care. Our portable-generator guides cover all of this thoroughly.

! Carbon monoxide is the danger with both

Every engine-driven generator gives off carbon monoxide — invisible, odorless, deadly. Keep tested carbon-monoxide alarms in your home no matter which kind you own, and never run any generator in an enclosed space.

Install, permits, and wiring

The two kinds also differ in what it takes to put them in and connect them.

A standby is always a professional job: a licensed electrician wires the transfer switch and panel, a licensed gas pro connects the fuel, and it needs a permit and inspection. It's more work up front, but it's done once, by pros, and signed off as safe.

A portable can be as simple as cords to a few appliances — no wiring at all. But the moment you want it to feed wired-in circuits like the furnace or well pump, you also need an electrician to install a transfer switch or interlock at your panel. That part is licensed work for either machine.

★ I coordinate the licensed work either way

I'm not a licensed electrician or gas pro, and I don't do that work myself. What I do is help you decide, then line up trustworthy licensed pros for whichever path you choose. Call (330) 200-8042.

Which way do you lean?

Here's the decision as a simple table. Find the rows that sound like your life, and see which way they point.

Your situation	Which way it usually points
Frequent or long outages	Toward a standby — hands-free for the long haul
Rare, short outages	A portable is often the smarter money
On a private well	Toward a standby that starts the pump itself
Away from home often	Toward a standby — a portable needs you there
Tight budget right now	A portable costs far less up front
Can't handle a heavy machine	Toward a standby — it does the work itself

✓ **Most homes point mostly one way**

Read down the column and you'll usually see a clear lean. If your rows are split, that's exactly the kind of close call I'm glad to help you settle.

When a portable is the smarter buy

I mean this sincerely — for plenty of homes, a portable is the wiser way to spend. Here's when.

- **Your outages are rare and short.** If the lights blink off a couple of times a year for an hour, a portable's hands-on routine is easy to accept.
- **You're on city water.** No well pump to start means a smaller, cheaper machine can cover your real needs.
- **Someone able is always home.** If there's reliably a person who can roll it out and start it, the automatic advantage matters less.
- **Budget is tight.** A portable gets you real protection now for a fraction of a standby's cost, and you can always step up later.
- **You want flexibility.** A portable can go to a campsite, a job site, or a neighbor's — a standby stays put.

★ I'll tell you when to save your money

If a portable is right for you, I'll say so plainly — I'd rather you spend well than spend big. Our portable-generator guides will take you from there. Call (330) 200-8042.

When a standby is worth every penny

And here's the flip side — the homes where folks are usually happiest they made the bigger investment.

- **Your outages are frequent or long.** Days-long storms make hands-free, steady power worth a great deal.
- **You're on a well.** Automatic water, even at night and even when you're away, is hard to put a price on.
- **Someone relies on powered medical equipment,** or the heat and cold are a genuine health concern.
- **You travel or the house is often empty.** A standby protects your home when no one's there to run a portable.
- **Wrestling a portable isn't realistic anymore.** If a heavy machine and a pull cord are more than you want, a standby simply handles it.

✓ It's about peace of mind as much as power

For many, the real value isn't a spec — it's never having to think about the power again. If that's what you're after, a standby delivers it.

Is there a middle path?

You don't always have to choose all-or-nothing today. A couple of sensible in-between routes are worth knowing.

One is to start with a portable now and step up to a standby later. A portable protects you today for less, and if you have an electrician install a transfer switch or interlock, you get a safe, wired hookup you'll understand well by the time you consider a standby.

Another is to right-size your ambitions: a mid-sized standby covering essential circuits, rather than the whole house, can cost less while still giving you the automatic, hands-off, run-while-away benefits. Our sizing guide covers that whole-house-versus-essentials choice.

✓ There's no wrong order

Plenty of folks grow into a standby over time. Starting with a portable isn't a mistake you have to undo — it's a perfectly good first step.

Where I fit in — honest, either way

Because I sell neither kind, I can be the rare voice in this decision with nothing riding on your answer.

- **What I help with:** weighing the two honestly for your home, your outages, your health, and your budget — and building your must-run list.
- **What I coordinate:** trustworthy licensed pros for whichever path you pick, from a standby install to a portable's transfer switch.
- **What I never do:** push the pricier option, earn a commission, or do the licensed electrical or gas work myself. I'm your guide, not your salesman.

★ Call before you spend

The best time to reach me is while you're still deciding. A little honest guidance up front saves a lot of money and second-guessing. Reach me at (330) 200-8042.

Questions to ask yourself

You don't need to be an expert — you just need honest answers to a few plain questions.

Q: How often does my power go out, and for how long?

Frequent or multi-day outages lean toward a standby; rare, short ones make a portable easy to live with. Your own history is the best guide.

Q: Am I on a well or on city water?

A well — where no power means no water — leans hard toward automatic backup. City water gives you more freedom to choose a portable.

Q: Will someone able be home to run a portable?

If the house is often empty, or if starting and moving a machine is a strain, a standby's run-itself ability is worth a lot.

Q: What can I comfortably spend, now and over time?

A portable costs far less up front; a standby costs more but does more, hands-free. Our cost-and-value guide helps you weigh the whole picture.

✓ Write your answers down

Jot these down before you talk to any installer or salesperson. Clear answers keep you from being sold a size or a kind you don't actually need.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most from folks deciding between the two, answered plainly.

Q: Which is better, a standby or a portable?

Neither, in the abstract — it depends on your outages, your water, your travel, your health, and your budget. A standby is hands-free and whole-home; a portable is cheaper and hands-on. This guide helps you match one to your life.

Q: Is a portable really much cheaper?

Yes, meaningfully so up front, especially if you run things on cords. A standby costs more because it's a whole professional install, not just a machine. Our cost-and-value and portable-generator guides lay out both sides.

Q: Can a portable run my whole house like a standby?

Usually not. A portable can feed chosen wired circuits through an electrician-installed hookup, often a few at a time, but running an entire home automatically is the standby's job.

Q: If I'm on a well, do I have to get a standby?

No — a portable can start a well pump through a proper hookup. But only a standby does it automatically, even when you're away, which is why so many well owners choose one. Our well-pump guide compares both.

Q: Do both need a permit and an electrician?

A standby always does. A portable needs an electrician only if you want it to feed wired circuits through a transfer switch or interlock; running cords to a few things needs neither.

★ Still weighing it up?

This is one of my favorite conversations, precisely because I don't sell either one. Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and let's find the kind 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 between a standby and a portable 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

Standby vs. Portable, at a Glance

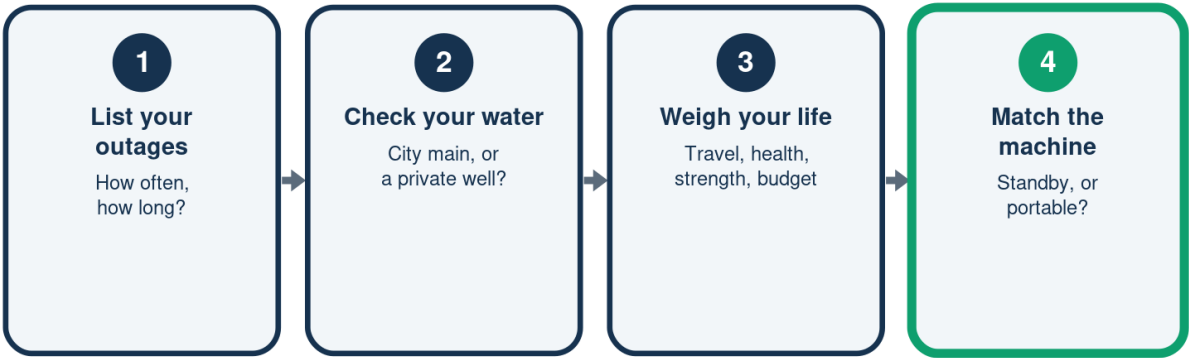
Same job, very different experience

	Standby	Portable
Starts	By itself	You start it
When away	Still works	Must be home
Fuel	Piped or tank	You refuel it
Coverage	Whole home	A few things
Upfront cost	Higher	Much lower
Install	Pros + permit	Simple or wired

Neither is 'better' — it's about your home and how you'd use it.

Deciding in Four Steps

The calm way to land on the right kind of backup



Answer these and the right kind almost picks itself.

What Each One Asks of You

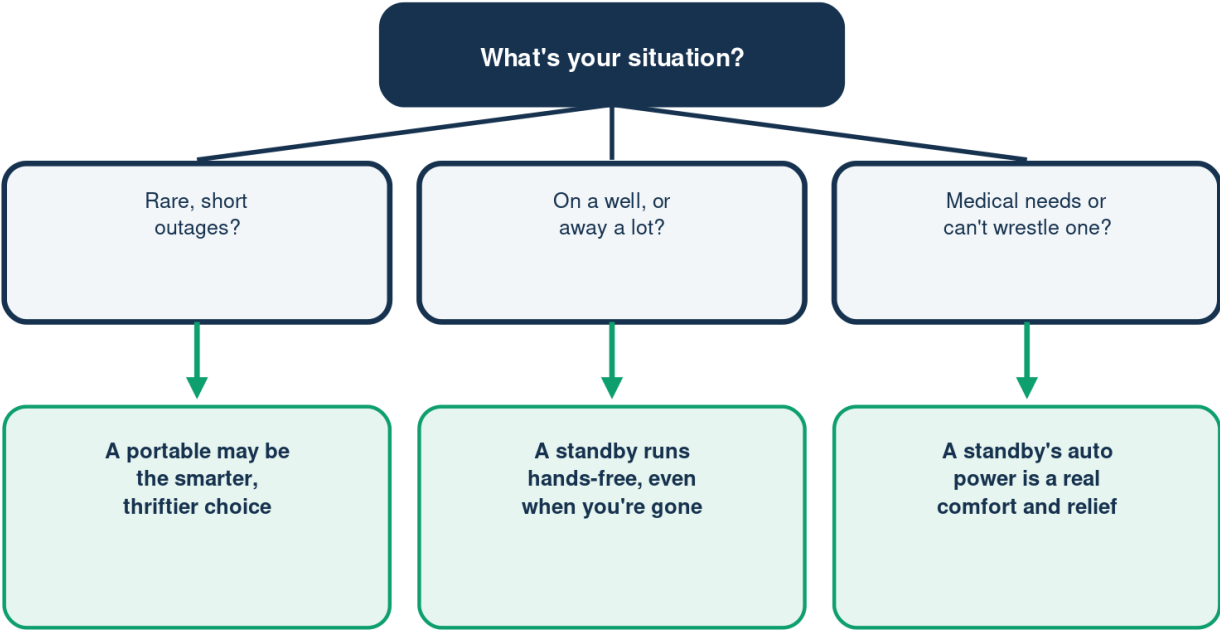
The hands-off machine versus the hands-on one

	Standby	Portable
In a storm	Nothing — auto	Go out, start it
Refueling	Hands-off	You keep it fed
If you're away	Runs anyway	It can't run
Physical effort	None	Wheel and pull

A portable trades a lower price for real hands-on work each time.

Which Kind Fits Your Home?

Let your situation point the way



Be honest about outages, water, health, and budget — then the choice gets clear.

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