

Keeping Cool Without Air Conditioning

Summer heat is something we all deal with. But what if there are blackouts, brownouts, or the air conditioner decides to go bust on you? What is your next step to keep your house cooler than the high heat outside.

Melissa K. Norris lives in Washington state and no one has air conditioning there. Alas, last summer they went for three high heat days in a row with the highest temperature hitting 120F. Needless to say that on their homestead out in the woods, they needed ways to keep themselves, their livestock, and their home cool. This talk is about the ways they handled the heat. She is a homesteader that I follow and find very useful and spot on in her advice. But there are a couple other tidbits added not from her. Plus there will be a couple extra things one can do.

First: Block all windows. Pull shades, curtains, shutters closed. If you don't have these hang up sheets or blankets over windows. Black out curtains as well can help. Do this before 7am so that you can keep all the sun's rays outside and not let them come in and heat the house during the day. If you have a porch, it can also help to have roll up blinds on it and put them down keeping even the porch cooler around the house. The windows and walls behind it will be cooler and influence the house as well.

Second: Minimize opening and closing the doors to the house. Do not use doors that are south facing on the house if possible. That side of the house will be the hottest. So it is best to only use a door on the north side or away from the direct sunlight. When using the door, only open it as short of time as possible. If a group of you are coming in together, wait till all are there and then hurry in as quickly as possible as a group. Don't keep opening the door multiple times.

Third: This is a long term project. Plant deciduous trees. These should not be planted too close to the house so that limbs or roots interfere with the house or foundation. Nor should they be planted so that they interfere with your garden's need of sunlight. But plant several, especially to the west of your house, then you will start getting shade sooner in the evening and the cooling time will start sooner. The reason for deciduous trees is that evergreens stay full year around and come winter it is nice for the trees to loose their leaves and then the sunlight can get through and help keep things warmer.

Fourth: Open windows at night. Once the sun has sunk below the horizon at night around the time that the temperature inside the house is the same as outside is a good time to do this. If you have screen doors, also opening your doors can help here. Of course depending on how safe you feel. For Melissa's family they live up in the boondocks and have guard dogs so have never had trouble with the doors open. Just make sure the screen doors are good to keep the flies and other critters out. Then close everything back up about 7am or before the temperatures start rising again for the day.

Fourth B: An old fashion way to keep cool at night as well is to sleep outside. I remember my grandparents talking of taking the mattresses off the beds and putting them in the yard to sleep on as it was so much cooler. This is especially the summer of 1936 which was so hot and held records for ages. My parents though have also done this back in the day. Also if you have a porch. Set up a sleeping porch or area. This is what those balconies on old Plantation houses were for. You could sleep out there and be up in the breeze at night.

Fifth: Minimize oven and stove top usage. Melissa found using either was best in the evening just before opening the house up to cool off. Some say to do it first in the morning but it can contribute to your house heating up faster for the day at that time.

Sixth: Consider other means of cooking. An instapot can be a big help. It cooks on a shorter time without heating up the kitchen. Also a crockpot can be useful though they run a much longer time

with electricity. You should consider outdoor cooking. Sun ovens or solar ovens, you can buy them or make homemade versions, can be a great way to cook without electricity or heating up your house. If there are no burn bans then a fire pit, grill, smoker are good routes. But with the ease of fires getting out of hand lately these last suggestions can be held off till it is a bit safer to have fire outside. Or used to save on electricity or power outages at other times.

Seventh: Create an old fashion summer kitchen. This is how historically homes could be kept cooler in summer as well as a good idea for today. Have an outside setup either on a patio, in breezeway, or whatever, where you can cook by different means. Can have different means of cooking that can be set up permanently. Keeping the heat outside even if the summer heat isn't as bad as it is right now can still help you conserve electricity and save some dollars on cooling your house.

Eighth: Cooling down the house with a fan or fans. Do you remember your grandmother getting the fan set in a window or doorway blowing out and another fan in another door or window blowing in. This will create a breeze through a house. Especially good at night when the air is cooler. But still moving air feels cooler so keeping it moving through the house is a great way to help it feel cooler.

Ninth: Having lived in Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, one of the main ways of cooling off is with evaporative or swamp coolers. I was that old fashion teacher that got to the room early and filled the pitcher with water and fill the large cooler and get it turned on and the room cool before the kids arrived. I have seen these around here. The one bit of advice about them is that they work best when the dew point is 35F or below. When it gets above that it will loose its efficiency. For this reason they are not a good option in humid climates. So they great for the desert but not something that I would recommend here.

Tenth: Here now are a couple ways to help yourself feel cooler. This is not particularly advice for heat exhaustion or serious issues in the heat. But just some ways to help feel cooler in your house without air conditioning or outside.

Tenth A: First, is to either use a wet rag or dish towel and wrap it around the back of your neck. You can also put these wet in the freezer. Even bend them to freeze in a shape to put around your neck. It can help you cool down. Also putting a cold rag in your armpits can be a great way to cool off because of how our bodies work.

Tenth B: Another tip is one that is old fashion and we did as kids to cool off when playing outside. Take an ice cube and rub it on your wrist. You can also just run cold water over them. Not as easy as carrying an ice cube when you run out play with your cousins.

Tenth C: Drink cooling drinks. This means no caffeine drinks or sodas. It is good to drink water, homemade electrolytes, or add cooling herbs to water. Fresh mint is great in water and cooling to drink. Many today are going back to the old fashion drinks of a couple of centuries ago. Nothing like a shrub mixed in some sparkling mineral water to feel better fast. I have recipes for shrubs and electrolytes. This is also so much cheaper than buying drinks.

Tenth D: Lastly. Wear breathable clothing. I agree with what said here for women. A flowing cotton dress is much cooler than about anything else you can wear. When I was involved with reenacting in the summer months, people would comment on how hot I must be in my dress. I would tell them that I could guarantee that my legs were much cooler than theirs. Most were wearing tight blue jeans or shorts. Blue jeans are confining to the legs and hold in heat. Shorts leave them open to the sun's rays to soak in as much heat as they want. My legs were free of binding cloth, but also protected from the sun. If they got a bit warm under there, I could just fan my skirt and have a lovely breeze going. Melissa stated that for her she found a flowing cotton dress much cooler in the heat than a tank top and shorts. Remember to protect your skin when out and natural fabric is a great way.

I hope there are some new ideas for you here to try and remember if the need arises.

Julia Allison 18 July 2022