

CITIZEN-TIMES.com

Radiant floor heat saves energy and keeps you warmer in winter

By Beach Barrett
Special to the Citizen-Times
February 24, 2007 12:15 am

Have you ever noticed how a house can feel cold in the winter even though the thermostat is set at 70 degrees? The air in the house may actually be 70 degrees, but it is attempting to heat all the surroundings to that temperature as well. The walls, floors and ceiling are colder than the air, and these surfaces are drawing heat away from the air and your body as well. On the other hand, imagine that the whole floor is heated to a gentle 75 or 80 degrees and like a warm heat lamp radiates a gentle all-pervasive heat to the objects in the room — including your body. The results are a gentle, natural, quiet, even heat: radiant floor heat.

Underneath the floor — be it wood, concrete, carpet or tile — warm water is flowing through 1/2-inch tubes that quietly deliver the heat. This water is regulated and pumped by the heating system and heated by gas or oil boilers, electric water heaters, wood-burning water stoves or solar energy. The tubing that carries the water is a specially formulated very tough form of polyethylene that is commonly called “pex” tubing. This tubing, when properly installed, will last hundreds of years and is usually guaranteed for at least 25 years. Pex tubing has been manufactured for more than 35 years and has been used in radiant floor heat systems in millions of homes in Europe and the United States.

Radiant floor heat may be a new concept to most of us, but it has been around, particularly in northern Europe, for a decade and a half. The industry has had time to mature and the components that are available today are both very reliable and sophisticated. Today’s boilers are smaller, smarter and much more efficient than the cast iron monsters of yesterday. Some new models are as high as 98 percent efficient, which means that almost every bit of gas that’s burned goes into the house and not up the chimney.

Solar energy is a perfect match for radiant floor heat. It is a low temperature form of heat, and the lower the water temperature, the more it can absorb heat from the sun. When radiant floor and solar are combined, there is the opportunity to take advantage of great tax credits through 2008. There is a North Carolina state tax credit of 35 percent of the total system cost up to \$3,500 with an additional 30 percent federal tax credit of up to \$2,000.

Radiant floor heating systems deliver the heat more efficiently, too. In forced-air systems, the heat accumulates at the ceiling then works its way down. Radiant is down at the floor where it’s needed and little is wasted at the ceiling. As a result, radiant floor heat is 15 percent to 30 percent more efficient than a similar forced-air system using the same fuel.

The bottom line in this case, though, is more that just efficiency: It’s comfort. There is no better form of heat, just ask anyone who has it. Visit their home and then you’ll know why. You won’t believe how tolerable the cold can be until you step on to a warm tile floor on a chilly morning. You might even begin to like winter!

For more information about Radiant Heated Floors contact the WNC Green Building Council at www.wncgbc.org. You can find information on upcoming events, links and information on other modern building practices and energy-related issues. Please contact the WNCGBC with any questions at the Green Building Hotline, 254-1995, or e-mail info@wncgbc.org.

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