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One Less Winter Shock: Warm Bathroom Floors

By ANNE EISENBERG

THE cold bathroom floors of the season are here to send shivers through sensitive feet. But now homeowners have handy ways to install heating systems beneath their floors, enhancing their homes' value while pampering themselves.



These heating systems come in many forms, including new kits that contain flexible mats embedded with heating coils. These are sold to both do-it-yourselfers and professionals.

The matting kits may be a tempting purchase for home remodelers who have decided to retile a floor and want to add a relatively inexpensive touch of warmth at the same time. And contractors who are already doing flooring work for a client may agree to add the matting for a small extra charge.

A heating system can also be connected to a programmable thermostat, so that a floor can be heated only when needed — say, from 6 to 9 a.m. and again from 7 to 10 p.m.



Bathroom floors are the most popular places for the systems, but they are also showing up under kitchens and mudrooms, as well as under the tiles or stone of sun porches, family rooms and basements, warming not only their barefoot owners, but also their children and pets who can play or curl up on the heated floor.

The systems are not meant to heat entire homes, in the way of more elaborate hot water setups that require pumps, valves, a boiler and considerable space for pipes. The larger systems, generally the province of contractors, can cost \$7,000 to \$13,000 for materials alone for a 1,500-square-foot home.

By contrast, the mat-based heating systems are typically used in a room or two and are not used under furniture or fixtures. They take up only a small amount of space beneath the floor and can be installed in three or four hours. And they are also fairly inexpensive — as little as \$600 for small floors, or \$1,200 or more for larger ones. Some shops also offer mats for spot-heating the central floor area of a bathroom (\$200 and up).

Typically, the mats have toasterlike electric heating elements woven through them. The mats roll out like electric blankets, usually on the original flooring, or subfloor, but sometimes directly on old tile or linoleum. Then they are taped, stapled or glued in place and covered with cement. Tiles, stone or hardwood go right on top.

Many a do-it-yourselfer can handle the placement of the mats, and sometimes even the tiling. But wiring the thermostat to the system and running a dedicated line from it to the breaker box should be done by a professional.

WarmlyYours (www.warmlyyours.com), a company based in Long Grove, Ill., outside Chicago, sells mat-based heating systems to homeowners and contractors at its Web site and through shops. The mats cost \$10 to \$12 a square foot.

Emile de Planque, whose home in Fairfax, Va., backs onto a golf course, checked out WarmlyYours on the Internet because he wanted to make improvements to his sunroom. “It was a three-season room,” he said of the glassed-in space, a great spot to enjoy the view and drink his morning coffee but uninhabitable in winter, despite a motel-style heating unit.

To beat the cold, he ordered heating mats and ripped out the existing tile floor himself. He rolled out the matting, stopping when he neared one end of the room, cutting a slit in the mesh and flipping the mat over in a U-turn to head back in the other direction. To keep the mat in place, he tacked it down with bits of double-sided tape. Then he poured a self-leveling compound over it, he said, “so you get a nice smooth surface for laying the tiles.”

It has been about a year since the chilly day when Mr. de Planque inaugurated his new floor, but he still remembers the intense pleasure of the moment. “We turned the thermostat on to 72 degrees,” he said. “I came out barefoot and when I stepped on the porch, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.”

He is already planning his next project: warming the floor of a master bathroom over an unheated garage.

WarmlyYours provides online instructions, an instructional DVD and a customized installation plan, said its chief executive, Georges Selvais. Using online software, customers can sketch their floor plans — dragging and dropping bathtubs, beds or sinks, for example, into the sketch — and can get an estimated price for the job overnight.

“Every night we send 200 or so floor plans to our office in India,” Mr. Selvais said, where employees determine how a customer should best roll out, say, 80 feet of matting to cover a space efficiently. “In the morning, we check the designs and send estimated costs and a personalized installation floor plan” to customers by noon, he said.

WarmlyYours also sells spot-warming kits, introduced in January, that fit under open areas of standard bathrooms. The cost ranges from \$110 for 10 to 20 square feet to \$345 for 34 to 43 square feet.

Rita Bellano sells the WarmlyYours kits and the programmable thermostats, a popular add-on, in her tile shop in Burnaby, British Columbia, near Vancouver, where, she said, “it never gets really cold.”

“But the heating mats are not about the weather,” she said. “They are about luxury.”

Mark Dennis, a renovation contractor in the Vancouver area who is a customer of Ms. Bellano’s shop and has installed heating systems in many bathrooms, agreed. “It rarely freezes here, but if there’s one thing people thank me for later, it’s a heated floor,” he said. “Once it’s in, they love it.”

The costs of running the system are modest, particularly if a timer is used. A system in a 30-square-foot bathroom used for six hours a day would usually run about 15 cents to 40 cents a day, depending on a region’s electricity costs.

Electric floor-warming mats from SunTouch, as well as those from Nuheat, are popular with many do-it-yourselfers, said Scott Cook, the proprietor of Warm Your Floor (www.warmyourfloor.com), in Laguna Hills, Calif. It sells both brands. SunTouch mats have a thin, open-weave construction with the heating element making an S pattern throughout. The mat adds only about one-eighth of an inch to the height of a standard tile or stone installation, he said.

Guy DeMascole, who uses SunTouch mats for his installations in and around Syracuse, where he is president of DeMascole Kitchen, Bath and Tile, has been handling electrical floors for 20 years. He remembers the days when the heating cables were as thick as coaxial cable and difficult to install. The new mat-covered cables are slender and easy to handle, he said; he has done about 40 installations this year.

THE materials are extremely durable, he said. But just to be sure, before he tiles over a floor he installs two sensors to detect the floor temperature. The wires from both sensors go to the thermostat, but only one wire is attached. The other is curled up in the electric box as a spare, he said, “just in case 10 years down the line” the original sensor fails. This is a far easier solution than tearing up the floor, he said.

Heated floors are becoming popular even in Florida, said Nancy Braamse, a kitchen and bath designer in Largo.

Stepping on warm tiles is one of the world's simple but unfailing pleasures. "No matter where you live," she said, "tile feels cold."

E-mail: novelties@nytimes.com.