Cooling your home

How to save money without sacrificing comfort

The new federal tax credit might be making you think of adding central air or upgrading your system. New systems are 20 to 40 percent more efficient than those made even 10 years ago. Our latest survey can tell you which brands have been more reliable than others. We also tested split ductless systems, which let you add room-by-room cooling if you can't add ducts.

But central air isn't right for every home. Our tests of window air conditioners found six recommended models for $260 or less. We also tested portable air conditioners. Here are the details:

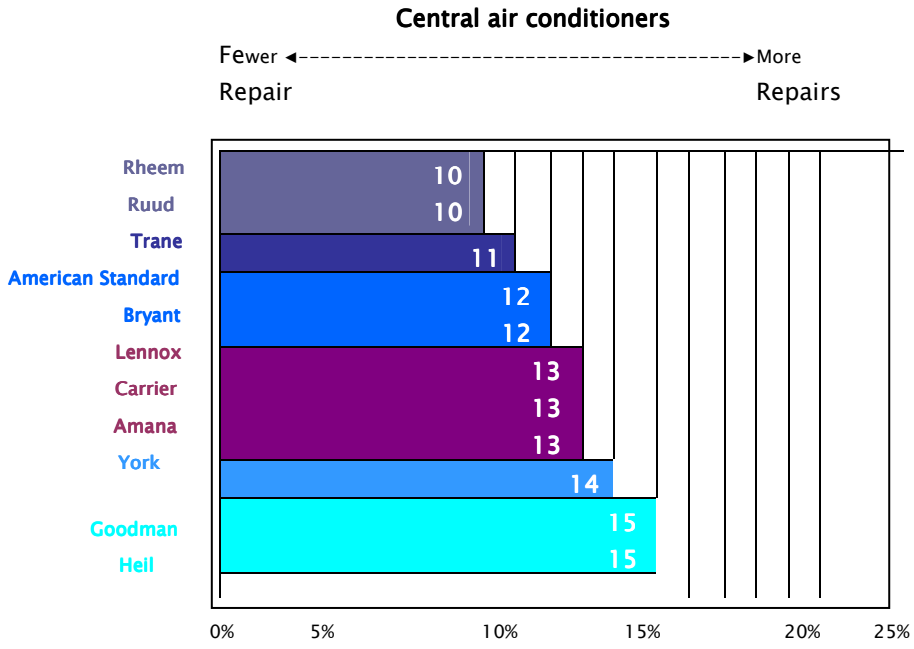
Central air: A sales leader delivers. Trane, the market leader, and Rheem and Ruud were reliable brands, and their systems were less likely to need repairs than those of Goodman and Heil, according to our latest Product Reliability Survey of more than 32,000 readers.

Reliability is crucial because breakdowns are inconvenient and costly. Almost two-thirds of readers in our survey who had a problem said their central air conditioning broke down for a day, and 31 percent reported a complete system failure. All in all, 48 percent spent $150 or more to get cool again. And more than 17,000 readers told us about their heat-pump-based cooling systems: American Standard, Bryant, Carrier, Lennox, Rheem, and Trane were equally reliable.

Window A/Cs: A big brand slips. General electric sells the most air conditioners in the U.S. Our latest tests revealed that GE's newest mid- and large-sized offerings didn't work quire as well as previous models, which were top-rated.

Efficiency pays, literally. Uncle Sam is offering a tax credit of 30 percent, up to $1,500, for replacing or adding central-air-conditioning systems or split ductless units. But the credit is valid only through 2010, and to qualify, the installed systems must have a seasonal energy-efficiency ratio (SEER) of 14 or higher for packaged.

Central air: Most and least reliable brands

The graph shows the percentage of units for Each of the 11 brands that were ever repaired or had a serious problem, based on the experiences of 32,550 readers who bought systems between 2002 and 2008. Differences of less than5 points aren't meaningful. Units installed by builders broke down more often than owner-installed ones. Data was adjusted to eliminate differences linked solely to age and usage. Models within a brand can vary and design or manufacture changes might affect future reliability. Still, choosing a brand with a good repair history can improve your odds of getting a reliable model

Source: Annual Product Reliability Survey. Consumer Reports National Research Center.