If the seasonal spring weather has inspired you to do a little “spring cleaning” you are not alone. It is once again that time when we find ourselves gathering up rugs, blankets, window treatments, jackets, sweaters and anything else we can cram into a washing machine. Everything washable must get one last cleaning before being stored away until next fall or a quick freshening to brighten up the house.

While tethered to your washer doing load after load of laundry you may have considered just how much water and energy clothes washing demands. If not, perhaps then when you opened your most recent utilities bills.

Clothes washers demand a great deal of the water and energy used in operating a home. Consider that the average person does 2.5 loads of laundry each week. Washers built prior to 1980 use 56 gallons of water per load (gpl), those built between 1980 and 1990 use 51 gpl, and those built after 1990 use 41.5 gpl. That means the average person is using between 104 and 140 gallons of water each week on laundry. The energy used to run washers is predominately spent on the heating of water and drying the clothes.

To save water and energy when doing laundry, water consumption and drying time must be reduced.

If a new washing machine is not in your near future, the best way to obtain water and energy savings is to minimize the number of loads you run, wash only full loads, use cold water and air dry clothes whenever possible.

On the other hand, if you are considering a new washing machine look for an Energy Star model. Energy Star is a rating system, which recognizes products that have met strict energy efficiency guidelines that have been set by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) and Department of Energy. Energy Star clothes washers use ½ the energy of a standard washer, and just 18-25 gallons of water per load, compared to the 41.5 gallons used by a standard washer.

Energy Star model clothes washers can be either top- or front-loading. Top-loading Energy Star models look very much like a standard washer, but have features that improve energy savings. These features include sensors, which closely monitor water temperatures and a rinse cycle that uses repeated high-pressure sprays instead of a full tub of water. Front-loading washers provide savings by tumbling clothes through a pool of water rather than soaking them in a drum as in a standard machine.

Both types of Energy Star washers conserve energy with their faster spin-cycle speed that allows more water to be extracted from clothes, thereby reducing drying time and energy use. Another benefit of these low-water using machines is that they require as much as 2/3 less detergent with each load. It is however,

important to determine if a special low-suds detergent is necessary for best results.

While there are both top- and front-loading Energy Star models, there are some additional benefits to a front-loading clothes washer. The tumbling action used by a front-loading machine places far less strain on delicate fabrics than does the agitating and twisting action of a top-loading machine. This means clothes will last longer.

Additionally, many front-loading machines are able to accommodate more clothes in each wash. Some will clean as many as four pounds more clothes than a top-loading machine.

A third benefit of front-loading washers is that many can be stacked on top of one another to fit into tight spaces or if left side-by-side, can be slipped below a counter surface, thus providing more efficient use of space in a laundry room. If space is extremely tight, there are even washer/dryer combination front-loaders that do both the washing and drying in the same machine.

Front-loading washing machines are all the rage in Europe, comprising 95 percent of the market, while here in America they account for only 5 percent. The wide acceptance in Europe is partly due to higher energy standard requirements, which have made the machines more commonplace and affordable. In America our energy standards do not yet demand the use of low-water-requiring clothes washers, consequently they are less commonly found and the initial cost of a front-loading machine is higher than a non-Energy Star top-loading machine.

While initial costs are greater, it is important to consider that the USEPA estimates the average family of four will save nearly $100 each year in water and energy savings by using a front-loading washing machine. At savings like that it would not take long to recoup the initial investment costs.