



## Switchgrass

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The big chill this winter is the cost of heating your home. The prices of natural gas, oil, electricity and propane have all skyrocketed. The financial strain has some homeowners looking at new ways to heat their homes. And if agricultural scientists are right, all you need to reduce your home heating bills is an acre of land.

The way energy specialist Roger Samson sees it, a long, straw-like grass could be the home heating fuel of the future. Switchgrass has no other known commercial use.

"We wanted something that even a buffalo wouldn't eat," Samson told Marketplace.

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Switchgrass is native to North America. It grew on the great plains with the buffalo and it has a proven track record as an energy source.

In Iowa, a generating station uses the grass to power its plant. In Ottawa, a company has been experimenting with switchgrass to produce ethanol.

Now, with the price of fossil fuels going through the roof, agricultural scientists see switchgrass as a new way to heat your home...for less.

Samson has been studying switchgrass as a home heating alternative for ten years.

"It's a plant that likes to hang around when times are tough," Samson explains. "This plant has root systems that are eight to ten feet deep. It'll take a drought, it'll take flood. And it doesn't require a lot of nutrients to grow."

The switchgrass is made into pellets that are burned in stoves and furnaces to produce heat.



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Switchgrass is made into pellets which are burned in special furnaces.



Switchgrass is not as easy to burn as wood. It leaves a gummy residue that can be handled in a furnace that costs around \$3,000.

The plant is easy to grow but it's not easy to burn. Unlike wood, switchgrass creates a sticky residue when it burns that gets in the way of the combustion process. It can't be burned in a regular wood stove or furnace.

Mark Drisdelle's Montreal company has developed a stove that will burn switchgrass pellets. But it costs about \$3,000. He suggests the stove would pay for itself in three or four years because heating your home with switchgrass should cost about a third of what you'd pay for gas, oil or electricity.

Scientists say an acre of switchgrass made into pellets will heat an average Canadian home for a whole year. They also say there's available land to produce enough of the plant to make it a viable heating alternative.

Mark Drisdelle's business partner, Claude LaPointe, admits switchgrass is not for everyone. LaPointe heats his house with wood and switchgrass pellets. His electric furnace sits idle in his basement. It used to heat his 2,000 square foot Montreal home for \$1,200 a year. The pellets heat it for \$400 for the whole year.

"There is more work," LaPointe admits. "I have to bring in the bags and load up the furnace every day or every second day, so there is a little inconvenience. The savings are there, but there is a little bit of maintenance."

Roger Samson says switchgrass is for people who are concerned about their household budgets and are concerned about out of control energy costs. He calls it a new energy option that will become more efficient and more economical in time.



Claude LaPointe's electric furnace sits idle while his switchgrass furnace does all the home heating work - at about a third of the cost.

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