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Heating oil tanks have the potential to store thousands of pounds worth of heating oil, and are often located in remote areas — this can make them an attractive target for thieves. The chance of being targeted by thieves is relatively low, but becoming a victim of heating oil theft is a costly, inconvenient and upsetting experience.

How heating oil is stolen

In order to steal heating oil, thieves will usually decant, syphon or pump oil from your tank into other containers.

Thieves might use this oil themselves, or sell it on. There have even been reports of criminals selling stolen oil back to the victim.

Opportunistic thieves might target tanks that they spot while out and about, whereas more organised criminals use tools such as Google Maps to identify homes with oil tanks in their gardens. Another tactic used by would-be thieves is following oil delivery vehicles in order to identify homes with full tanks.

Ways to Avoid Heating Oil Theft

Choose the right type of heating oil tank

Let's start at the beginning. One of the best ways to avoid heating oil theft is to choose the right type of heating oil tank.

When it comes to security, steel tanks offer a more robust storage solution when compared to plastic tanks. That's because plastic tanks can be easily drilled into in order to syphon off oil. Steel tanks are also heavier, and therefore more difficult to remove from your premises.

Locate your heating oil tank in a secure place

When choosing where your heating oil tank should be located, you need to find the balance between aesthetics, convenience, safety and security. Of course, you also need to comply with all applicable regulations.

It's most common for people to install their oil tank outdoors, however there are options for you to keep it indoors or even underground.

Indoors

Locating your heating oil tank indoors is probably the most secure option when it comes to fuel theft. Not only does this make it more difficult to access the tank, it also means that thieves are unlikely to know you even have one.

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Outdoors

Firstly, place your tank as far away from the road as possible. You don't want opportunistic thieves to spot your tank while driving by, nor do you want to facilitate a quick getaway.

Secondly, if your tank is exposed, it's a good idea to conceal it with a fence, wall, plants or trellis. Just make sure to leave enough room for servicing, maintenance, and oil deliveries.

Thirdly, if possible, install a roof over your tank. This will prevent thieves from spotting it on satellite images and targeting your home.

Fourthly, consider placing a gravel path up to and around your tank. This is a relatively easy and cost-effective tip. The gravel will create a noisy route that could spook trespassers — or even alert you to their presence.

And lastly, locate your tank in a position that is visible from inside your home. The potential of being spotted and caught is a huge deterrent for thieves. If your tank is visible from inside your home, you could also consider additional security measures so thieves think you're at home even when you're not. For example, you could use lightbulbs on a timer or leave the radio on when you go out.

Install an oil tank cage

If your tank is outdoors, there are still plenty of extra precautionary measures you can take to deter fuel theft. One of these options is an oil tank cage.

An oil tank cage is perhaps the best form of security available as it creates an extra physical barrier for thieves. The cage should fully enclose your tank while leaving enough room for maintenance and deliveries, and be bolted or concreted to the ground.

The downside of an oil tank cage is that it won't work for everyone as it requires a large amount of space.

Install security lighting

If your oil tank is visible from your home, motion-activated security lighting will startle any trespassers and could alert you to their presence. Alternatively, install dusk-till-dawn lights that ensure your tank is lit 24/7.

Remember: Do not install security lighting if your tank is out of sight; this will help rather than hinder would-be thieves.

Install CCTV

CCTV cameras may deter thieves, as well as provide valuable evidence for insurance claims and police reports should a fuel theft occur.

Plant defensive plants

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Most thieves won't want to negotiate prickly plants during a theft. Not only are they painful, but they can capture blood and clothing fibres that increase the risk of being identified.

Invest in a wireless tank alarm

Some electronic oil level gauges can be linked to an alarm inside your home. If the oil level suddenly drops, the alarm will sound and alert you to the fuel theft — or perhaps a leak.

Most level monitors utilise ultrasound to measure the volume of oil in the tank. The ultrasound transmitter communicates with a receiver in your home, ensuring you never run out of oil, but also that thieves and leaks can be instantly detected.

Generally, wireless monitors have a range of up to 200m, so are effective no matter how far your tank is located from your house.

You can use this system to double up as a deterrent, too. Just display a 'This tank is alarmed' sign or sticker by your tank.

Remember: Check your heating oil level regularly so you know how approximately how much you have.

Install a lock

Thieves often come equipped with tools, so it's worth investing in high-quality padlocks for your tank lock or cage. A padlock that isn't robust can often be opened with a sturdy pair of bolt cutters.

Round-shackle padlocks come highly recommended because they have a close shackle that's difficult to access with bolt cutters. Plus, because the shackle is not spring-loaded, round padlocks will not unlock if the keyway barrel is drilled into.

Usually, the inspection cap on your tank will have eyelets to enable padlocking. However, you may need to purchase specialist locking bars for other access points.

You could also consider an external 'arm' lock. These external locks are designed to secure the extraction points on single skin and banded plastic tanks. A double lock protects both the inspection hole and the fill point, making it very difficult for thieves to get access to either. These locks are easy to fit and require no drilling. In most cases, however, they do need to be secured with a top-grade padlock.

Add a spinning tank cap

Spinning caps are a valuable security tool as fuel owners don't need to rely on a padlock to secure their tank.

A spinning cap utilises clever technology so that when it's locked, it spins freely, making it all but impossible to get off. It is based on a one-piece design that eliminates torque points, meaning forced entry with a crowbar or similar tool is impossible.

Install a remote tank level text alert system

A wireless level monitor can only inform you of a drop in oil levels when you're at home. However, a remote tank level text alert system can let you know when you're on the move. This is because such systems can be set up to send a text message to multiple mobile phones when changes inside your oil tank occur, such as a sudden drop in oil level.

What to do If Your Heating Oil is Stolen?

Reporting a heating oil theft in progress

If you notice any suspicious activity, record as much evidence as possible. This might mean noting down car registrations, writing descriptions of the people, or taking photographs. Do not confront intruders — stay inside your home until you are sure it is safe.

If you have good reason to believe that there is a fuel theft in progress, you should call 999 and await instruction from the police.

Reporting a heating oil theft that has already occurred

If you discover that a heating oil theft has already occurred, you should call the non-emergency 101 police number and report the crime immediately.

Make sure to save any relevant CCTV recordings and pass on any other pertinent information to the police.

If a thief successfully steals from your heating oil tank, it's important that you implement extra security measures to reduce the risk of being retargeted.