

Connecticut wholesaler helps talented homeowner install his own radiant system

BY JOHN VASTYAN
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In an e-mail to Taco late last year, Steve Taber introduced himself by writing this message: “Just wanted to let you guys know that I am on my fourth year in my new home that I built myself. I have four RMBs [Radiant Mixing Blocks] running my radiant heat. They work perfectly. I



New Britain Plumbing Supply heating and purchasing specialist Chris Crooks (left), talks with Steve Taber about circulator selection for his installation.

installed and plumbed the complete system myself. They run very quiet. In my opinion the Taco RMB is the de-facto choice for any residential radiant installation. Thank you.”

Naturally, a note like that stirred some curiosity. With a bit of checking, it was discovered that Taber — who not only installed an entire mechanical system, but did a spectacular job of it — had a little help from his friends.

This story began about four years ago . . .

Chris Crooks has been in the wholesale plumbing supply business



Homeowner/system installer Steve Taber sets parameters for one of four Taco Radiant Mixing Blocks. Each device offers complete injection mixing, combining a variable speed injection mixing control, injection circulator, system circulator and air elimination in a single unit.

for 35 years. In his job as a heating and purchasing specialist for New Britain Plumbing Supply of Connecticut, a division of Hajoca Corp., he has participated first-hand in the rise of radiant heating in the past decade, even putting in a radiant system in his own home years ago.

According to Crooks, New Britain Supply handles about six to eight radiant jobs a year, mostly with area contractors. Every now and then, however, an ambitious do-it-yourselfer stops in for advice and equipment intended for a radiant installation they’ll handle personally. Crooks estimates his firm has worked with 10 or 15 non-pros in the last five years. They come from all walks of life, but the ones capable of doing a radiant installation without professional help

have one thing in common: they’re mechanically experienced (not just “inclined”) and the best of them have done a sizeable amount of research and study before they begin the hands-on work.

As it turns out, Steve Taber is one of those talented amateurs. Taber installed whole-house radiant in his new home in Newington, Ct., south of Hartford, just over four years ago, working long nights and weekends. He’s a lifelong car jock and classic car restorer who now works as an auto insurance appraiser.

When it comes to plumbing and electricity, Taber (who single-handedly installed both) is entirely self-taught. He says he learned a lot by watching *This Old House* on PBS over the years, especially in the show’s early years with Bob Vila. And he knows how to use the internet to download installation manuals and product spec sheets, which he mentally devours.

Taber’s 4,600-square-foot house has three bedrooms and two and a half baths. There are six heating and cooling zones in all, covering everything from his large garage, basement and upstairs living space to air handlers, radiant heat (four of the zones) and domestic hot water. He even has a spare zone in reserve.

Taco products, lit, online information

Taber spoke at length with Crooks about the radiant system and shared blueprints of his house. Ultimately, Taber selected a range of Taco equipment for the job.

“Taco installation manuals were a huge advantage,” said Taber. “They were well written and organized, and the wealth of online information was a huge help, too. Plus, their equipment was designed for ease of installation — a big difference for a non-pro like me.”

It turned out that this was one of the prerequisites for Taber. He was diligent in searching out installation literature long before the job began. “If I found the information to be a hassle, I knew the product installations would follow suit, so I avoided ’em,” he said.

That installer-friendly approach was backed up by some personal touches: Uponor (whose tubing and manifolds he purchased) did a free radiant system design to help Taber along, and Taco sent a representative to his home to check his work.

The key to Taber’s radiant system are four Taco Radiant Mixing Blocks, recommended to him by Crooks. Crooks has been recommending Taco his entire career, and calls Taco products “bullet-proof” for reliability and service. He was very impressed with the RMB from the first time he saw it, and credits it as being “very easy to work with.” The RMB is a complete piping, pumping, air elimination and control package in a single wall-mounted unit. It combines a variable-speed injection mixing control, injection circulator, system circulator and air elimination unit. With only four pipe connections required, the Taco RMB greatly reduces installation time and provides substantial space savings on mechanical boards. Installing and



wiring the RMB, says Taber, was “so simple. Very easy to lay-out, plumb and wire.”

He also credits the Taco RMB with working very well with the radiant manifolds, saying, “They were a very nice fit.”

Taber installed Uponor Tru-Flo



Taco RMBs have just four pipe connections, are quick and easy to install, and save space on mechanical boards. Taber described installing and wiring the RMBs as “so simple. Very easy to lay-out, plumb and wire.”

manifolds that can adjust flow rates and selected Uponor PEX tubing that his wife and father helped him lay. He also incorporated some hydro-air in some areas of the house and attic. Major equipment components included a gas-fired, sealed combustion boiler and 55-gallon indirect. And he installed a number of Taco system products — 007 circulators, electronic ball valves and zone valves.

In addition to his Taco visitor — and inspections by separate plumbing and electrical inspectors (Taber passed both) — Chris Crooks visited the house several times during the installation to check on Taber’s progress. “Steve did a very nice job,” he said. “Obviously very few people without training and experience can do this kind of work, and we certainly don’t recommend it. Steve Taber is just one of those rare people.” ■



Car restorer Taber put his talents to use designing and installing his professional-looking radiant system.